スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❸

ナーガの冒険

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 3

Naga's Adventure

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(March 2026)

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Hydra Warning

"Don't bother. With your level of skill, you won't be able to take that thing down."

The man sitting in the corner of the shop suddenly spat out a line that reflexively ticked me off. He kept his gaze lowered toward the small cup he held in both hands. He looked to be around forty, slightly thin, but his mannerisms and aura were unmistakably those of a warrior. With a black eye patch over his left eye, he had a sort of unapproachable atmosphere about him.

Naga and I had arrived here only moments ago. Just as I finished signing the guest register and sat down in the first-floor dining room—thinking I'd grab a light snack before dinner—an old guy approached us even faster than the waitress could come to take our order. Claiming to be the town mayor, the man completely ignored our annoyed expressions and started moaning at us unilaterally, begging us to defeat a livestock-ravaging hydra up in the back mountains or something to that effect.

And then—that heckling from the side.

I didn't know on what grounds he judged our ability as lacking, but for a sorceress and warrior like me, Lina Inverse, a hydra was barely worth counting. One spell and the whole mountain goes *kaboom*.

"Raul-kun..."

The mayor raised a bitter voice before Naga or I could even open our mouths.

"Please, don't butt in. It's true you were the best warrior in this town, and you seem strangely obsessed with that hydra... but still... you can't fight that thing with that eye."

The warrior lightly scratched the eye patch over his left eye with his fingertip.

"No... the one to defeat that thing isn't anyone else; it's me. Won't you leave this job to me? I'm asking you. Mr. Mayor."

The tension grew taut in the gaze exchanged between the warrior named Raul and the mayor. It seemed like there were "circumstances" involved... but I really wished they wouldn't dive into their private world so suddenly.

"Hmph. I do not know the details, but in the end, the opponent is a single hydra..."

It was, of course, Naga who stood up from her seat while making her pitch-black cloak flutter much more than necessary. Even though summer was over, her costume was the same as always. She brushed back her long black hair and declared:

"For the greatest sorceress of the century, Naga the White Serpent, defeating such a thing is mere child's play! With a single strike of an offensive spell, I shall bury it into the darkness! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

She placed her hands on her hips and laughed loudly. And then—a moment of silence.

The man and the mayor were still glaring at each other. With a small cough, Naga sat back down with an embarrassed look on her face.

"...It seems they weren't listening. Those two."

"...It's fine... just leave me be..."

She muttered with a lonely face while a metaphorical cold wind seemed to blow past.

"—Then how about this?"

The mayor finally spoke after a short pause.

"You go to defeat the hydra. And these people shall go as well. The one with the skill and the luck of the heavens will be the one to defeat it. You shouldn't have any complaints with that."

"Agreed."

Raul nodded once.

...That was all well and good... but we hadn't actually said anything about taking this job yet... However, once "luck and skill" were brought up, if we refused here, it would look like we were just scared of the hydra.

"...Is that acceptable? You two?"

"Yes."

"Hmph. A mere hydra, before the might of Naga the White Serpent..."

"Then, regarding this matter..."

"Please, just listen to me!"

Naga raised a voice of protest to the mayor, who was trying to ignore her again. With

an overtly annoyed expression, the mayor said:

"...Understood... I will listen to you, so please, say whatever you wish."

"Hmph. Well then..."

She somehow managed to pull herself together and fluttered her cloak once more.

"A single hydra is nothing! With my power, defeating it will be an effortless task!"

And then—another moment of silence.

"...Are you happy now?"

At the mayor's cold remark, Naga couldn't help but shed a tear. ...Ah, it was definitely autumn...

Even in autumn, the afternoon sunlight was warm. In the midst of it, I was huffing and puffing my way up the mountain.

It was the day after we accepted the request. Naga and I were wandering around searching for a single hydra whose location was unclear beyond just being "in the back mountains." Since there were likely many people in some regions who had never seen one, I should probably explain: you should think of a hydra as something like a giant lizard with a bunch of snake heads growing out of it. When newborn, they were only about the size of a rabbit, but after six months, they reached a size comparable to a tiger, and after two years, they became so large they wouldn't fit inside a house even if they stood on their heads.

Growth in body length generally stopped there, and after that, the skin supposedly got thicker and the number of heads increased as the years went by. Among them, some species apparently performed the clever trick of growing heads back immediately after they were cut off, but if I hit one hard with a powerful offensive spell, I wouldn't have to worry about that.

"Honestly... searching for it is more of a pain than the actual battle..."

I grumbled while wiping away sweat and plopped down on a nearby stump. Because of the thick, overgrown trees all around, visibility was extremely poor. I didn't know how big the target hydra was, but at this rate, I couldn't even use the tactic of scouting from the air.

"It seems the geographical advantage lies with that man Raul," Naga muttered, staring off in a random direction with her hands on her hips.

"I wonder if there's any good way to find it...?"

"Hmph, I have an idea."

She said this while puffing out her chest arrogantly.

"...What kind?" I asked without any expectations.

"First, I shall call out to the hydra in a loud voice. Then you will provide the 'tsukkomi' by saying something like, 'As if it would come out just because you called it!' In most patterns, the hydra should appear right at that moment."

Hmm, I see. It was the so-called "cliché attack."

"...But Naga, if that fails, the atmosphere afterward will be awkward. With the weird weather we've been having lately, there's a high chance it'll fail, don't you think?"

"I see..."

It was logic that even I didn't quite understand, but for some reason, she nodded with a convinced look.

"—I know, Naga! How about this!? First, you use your arts to summon a single hydra. We beat the living daylights out of it and take it back to town. Even if the real hydra shows up afterward or gets defeated by Raul, we'll just settle it by saying, 'Oh my! There were actually two of them!'"

"That's it, Lina!"

Naga's expression brightened. ...I had a slight feeling that this wouldn't actually solve the incident at all, but I figured that was a minor detail.

"Well then, they say there's no time like the present..."

Just as Naga was about to start chanting a spell, a sound echoed through the trees.

Go-gyushaaaaaaa!

It was unmistakably the cry of a hydra.

"It's close!"

"Let's go!"

We ran across the ground. Before we had run very far, we came out into a fairly open area. Hidden by the greenery and hard to see from a distance, a cliff about the height of a house towered there, with a single cave opening in its face. Crouching at the

entrance of that cave was a man.

It was none other than Raul.

"What happened!?"

He cast a glance toward us while holding his right shoulder. With a pained smile, he said:

"I found the beast... I chased it this far, but it escaped into the cave."

"Are you injured?"

"It's nothing... just a scratch from when I tripped..."

As he spoke, he tried to stand up.

"Guh!"

He let out a small groan and his knees buckled.

"Let me see the wound. I can at least use simple healing arts."

He stared silently into my eyes for a moment.

"—My apologies. Then I'll ask you to do so. It's my right knee and right shoulder."

"Very well—"

I crouched down beside him and checked the condition of the wound.

"...Raul-san..."

"What is it?"

He turned his pale face, slick with cold sweat, toward me.

"It really *is* just a scratch!"

My voice reflexively went up in pitch. His pants were torn a tiny bit, and he had slightly scraped his kneecap. That was it.

"That's what I told you! A scratch from when I tripped!"

"Then don't look like you're in so much pain! I totally thought you were putting on a brave face while hiding a major injury..."

"It hurts because it hurts! I can't help it, can I!?"

Sure, it probably hurt... but even a child wouldn't cry over an injury like this... Does

this old guy have no guts? Regardless, since I was the one who offered to heal him, I couldn't very well say "I changed my mind." I reluctantly began to chant the *Recovery* spell. This was the first time I truly felt that mana was a waste.

With a magical light lit above our heads, the three of us entered the cave. Typical of such caves, the air had a damp, clinging smell.

"Don't assume the hydra is the only enemy."

Raul spoke to us as he led the way with a drawn longsword in one hand.

"There are rumors that many dangerous things live in this mountain. The townspeople make sure not to enter here often."

"When you say 'dangerous things,' specifically what kind are we talking about?" I asked.

To an ordinary citizen who had never even held a sword, things like orcs or kobolds would be dangerous enough, but to Naga and me, those weren't even worth considering as enemies.

"...I haven't actually seen them myself, but according to rumors, there are werewolves and ogres..."

I see. For a normal person, those were indeed dangerous opponents. As I was thinking that—

"Wait!"

Raul suddenly brought the group to a halt. We weren't even that deep inside. We were at a point where the light from the entrance of the winding cave had just disappeared. I hurriedly checked our surroundings. However, I didn't sense anything in particular.

"What happened!?"

At my question, he abruptly sat down.

"A quick break."

"What are you talking about!?"

I reflexively kicked him in the back of the head.

"What do you think you're doing!? All of a sudden!"

"Don't 'what do you think you're doing' me! We just got inside!"

"I'm tired, so it can't be helped!"

"Are you really the best warrior in that town!?"

"Listen to people! The mayor said I *was* the best warrior!"

Why was he bragging about the past tense...?

"Anyway! If you keep acting so spineless, the year will be over before we find the hydra! Stand up and get moving!"

"...Good grief... young girls these days have no compassion for their elders..."

Muttering in an incredibly old-mannish tone, he finally got up. ...I had a feeling this wasn't a matter of compassion.

At any rate, Raul threw about five tantrums along the way, but excluding those, the group seemed to be making steady progress toward the hydra. Around the time a raw, fishy stench began to mix into the air, the cave split into two paths.

"—Which way do we go?"

"My gut says right. So we'll go left."

He said something that didn't make much sense.

"Hmph. It seems that despite all your talk, you are afraid of the hydra after all."

"Don't be stupid. It's just that my gut feelings almost never come true. That's all."

He responded to Naga's jab with a pathetic line delivered in an incredibly arrogant tone. In a way, he might actually be an impressive guy.

"...Anyway, let's go left then."

There was no point in arguing here. I took the lead and stepped into the left tunnel. The two of them followed. How long did we walk? I stopped dead in my tracks.

"What's wrong? A break?"

"As if. There's something here," I answered Raul's question. My gaze remained fixed on the darkness ahead. That "presence" was also holding its breath, seemingly watching us. A metallic, strange odor mixed in the air. The smell of blood.

"The hydra!?"

No sooner had she spoken than Naga threw her *Lighting* spell deep into the darkness.

Struck in the eyes by the sudden light, the creature let out a growl. Unfortunately, it wasn't a hydra. It was an ogre. It was a carnivore, and it was about two heads taller than a human. It seemed to have been in the middle of a meal; a rather "splatter-film" animal carcass—probably a boar or something—was lying nearby.

"...It looks like this wasn't the right path..."

"It might be further back."

Raul spoke while keeping his eyes on the ogre, as I spoke while slowly backing away.

"If it were, we would have run into it and there would have been some kind of scuffle. There aren't even any traces of that, so it really must be the other path. There's no need to fight a pointless battle. Let's retreat without provoking it too much."

"That's fine, but... your partner fainted."

"Whaaat!?"

I reflexively turned my gaze to see Naga lying on the ground in a strangely maiden-like pose. Dammit! She must have gotten lightheaded from seeing the animal carcass!

Gugaruaaa!

The ogre's roar echoed. It seemed to have identified us as enemies.

"In this case, we have no choice but to defeat it."

As he spoke, he charged in with a longsword in one hand, letting out a battle cry! Wait a minute! This would be settled so easily with a single spell from mid-range! To defeat an ogre with direct attacks, you'd need at least the skill of a veteran warrior. Furthermore, if he got into a dogfight, it would make it impossible to provide spell support.

The ogre swung its arms wide, taking a menacing stance and letting its angry voice echo. At that moment—Raul abruptly plopped down on his backside.

"What's wrong!? ...Don't tell me you're saying 'a quick break' again!?"

"Don't worry! My legs just gave out from the shock!"

...Seriously... this guy... Well, it would make things go faster this way.

"*Damp Vlass!*"

My spell shattered the ogre's body in a single strike.

"Hmph. How trivial."

"Truly... a lackluster opponent."

I didn't know when they had revived, but Naga and Raul were standing there with their arms crossed arrogantly.

"You two didn't do a single useful thing!"

"Hmph. A mere ogre is not worth the personal attention of Naga the White Serpent."

Naturally, she said this while looking in a completely different direction, averting her eyes from the gory ogre corpse.

"Indeed. It would only stain my blade."

...These... these people... Just as I was about to scream, a sound came.

Guro-gyushaaaaaaa!

The faint cry of the hydra echoed from far away!

"That's it!"

"Let's go!"

Guided by the intermittent cries, we ran through the cave. Eventually, we reached the spot where it had split into two.

"This way!"

"No—wait a minute!"

I listened closely to the hydra's voice which I heard again—

"No! It's from outside!" Raul shouted.

It seemed the hydra had headed outside while we were busy with the ogre. We followed the trampled undergrowth and gradually descended the mountain. Judging by the state of the plants, its body size seemed to be about average.

"...This is bad..." Raul muttered.

"What is?"

"The beast is heading straight for the town."

"What!?" our voices harmonized.

"It seems it intends to attack the town's livestock again."

"Then we have to hurry!"

"Wait!" Raul stopped us.

"Before that, I have a request for you. Could you let me be the one to settle things with that hydra?"

I held back Naga with my hand as she looked like she was about to heckle him.

"There are... circumstances, right?"

"U-Umu..." He looked away and stammered.

"Is it that left eye?"

At my words, he replied with a serious expression.

"No—this is just a boil."

...What a misleading guy...

"Then what on earth...?"

"That is..."

"Hmph. Telling us you can't say the reason but want us to grant your request... isn't that a bit too selfish?"

At Naga's words, he hung his head.

"True... you're right. Fine, I'll speak honestly. Just promise me one thing. That you won't tell the townspeople about this."

We looked at each other.

"Fine. We promise."

He nodded at my words.

"It was during the summer festival two years ago. I bought a running-bird egg from a peddler. —You know what a running-bird is."

Naga and I nodded at the same time. They were somewhat charming birds about the size of a pony; they couldn't fly, but their running speed was top-notch, and they could race a horse even with a rider. However, they were difficult to raise, and buying an adult bird was incredibly expensive. Thus, the common method was to buy them as

eggs and raise them, though most died before reaching maturity.

"But, you see. It was a total fake, and when it hatched, it was a baby hydra!"

...Oh boy...

"I thought 'I don't need this' and threw it away in the back mountains, which was all well and good, but it grew up quite splendidly. It comes down to the town and attacks livestock, and I've been quite troubled by it..."

"What do you mean 'and that's how it is'!?" Naga knocked him over.

"...In other words, you are the root of all this evil..."

"Calling me the root of all evil is rude!"

"Is it wrong?"

"Don't ask me!"

...He was a rather troublesome old guy.

"I understand the situation for now. ...Well, do your best without dying."

I said this in a completely dismissive tone.

"There it is! Over there!"

Naga shouted and pointed to the area where the trees thinned out. There was the back of the hydra, running down the mountain slope. Past the end of the slope was the town. We couldn't let it become a battlefield. If I fired a *Damp Vlass* from behind right now, it would be over easily, but that wouldn't be interesting... rather, I should let Raul save face.

"I'll try to stop it!"

I chanted a spell.

"*Ray Wing!*"

Using the high-speed flight art, I flew over the hydra in a single breath and stood directly in its path. Shaking its nearly ten heads, the hydra charged regardless. However, I had no intention of having a contest of strength with such a thing.

"*Dill Brand!*"

A tremendous strong wind—no, a mass of ultra-high-pressure air—gouged a large

horizontal line into the ground between me and the hydra. As expected, even the hydra stopped in its tracks.

"Raul-san! Now!"

But he didn't move an inch.

"What are you doing!?" Naga raised a voice of condemnation beside him.

"No need for concern! I'm just a little bit terrified!"

He really was. His knees were shaking. Fine then! I took a thin knife from my pocket.

"*Shadow Snap!*"

The thrown knife pinned the hydra's shadow to the earth. At that moment, the hydra's movements came to a halt. This was a technique that bound the opponent from the astral side, sealing their movement. No matter how much strength they used, as long as their shadow was on the ground, they couldn't break this spell.

"Now! Raul-san! It can't move now!"

"Ooh! Then I'm not afraid!"

He deliberately circled around to the front and pointed the tip of his sword at the hydra with a flourish.

"Evil hydra that attacks livestock and plunges people into the depths of fear and despair! Behold the blade of justice of Raul Clements!"

Calling it "justice" after making the opponent unable to move—he certainly had some nerve.

"Here I gooo!"

He swung his sword wide and struck with a shout! But—

Shogee!

Supopeen!

The hydra suddenly began to move right in front of him, and he was sent flying quite spectacularly. ...Ah. The sun went behind a cloud. He got up unsteadily and glared at me with a resentful gaze.

"...Y-You li..."

"Shut up! That was an unfortunate accident!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You're all talk, aren't you, Lina!" Naga suddenly burst into laughter.

"Hmph! Fine then, in that case, I'll hold the hydra down with a Stone Golem, so you deliver the finishing blow in the meantime!"

At Naga's words, Raul frowned.

"Is it really going to be okay this time!?"

"Hmph! I'd appreciate it if you didn't lump me in with someone else!"

I didn't want to be lumped in with her either.

"Naga! Make sure it's a decent one this time!" I called out to her while keeping my eyes fixed on the hydra's eyes (there were many).

"Hmph! I'm a bit different today!"

She began to chant the spell in response. ...However, in her case, "a bit different" usually just meant "average." Her magical power was considerable, but the problem was how she used it. Thanks to that, I had been through many terrible experiences. (Especially third parties.)

Anyway, I managed to keep the hydra pinned there by firing off small tricks here and there. Then, Naga's spell was completed!

"*Vu Vraimer!*"

It seemed that this time, it was a standard, proper art. Countless rock masses of various sizes rolling nearby gathered in one place. It was easily two sizes larger than the hydra in front of us. Its limbs were short and it was quite stout, but it unmistakably took the form of a human. Whether it was the creaking of stone or a war cry, the Golem, given temporary life, let out a roar.

"Hey! Naga!"

"Don't say anything!"

"Your Golem is rolling down the slope! Do something!"

"I don't want to hear it!"

I didn't want to see it either! Naga's Golem had let out a loud roar, and in that moment, it completely lost its balance (it seemed the left and right legs were of different lengths) and began rolling down the mountain slope. ...As I mentioned before, and as a fact I really didn't want to admit... there was a town at the end of

that slope.

"What do you think you're doing, you woman!?"

"Don't make me laugh! It's your fault for being afraid of a mere hydra and dawdling!" Naga shouted back at Raul.

It seemed Raul was a little unhappy that his own house had been demolished by the rolling Golem. (Though that might be expected...) Regardless...

"Stop arguing! Just fight the hydra already!" I shouted to Raul between chanting spells.

"Stopping a hydra" was easy to say, but it was an extremely difficult feat. If you think I'm lying, you can try it with another safe animal, if not a hydra, and you'll see.

"B-But..."

"If you don't like it, I'll defeat it with a spell!"

"That's not what we agreed!"

He was a completely selfish old guy. These kinds of people existed sometimes. What on earth did he want me to do...? But at that very moment, a thought flashed through my mind.

"Raul-san! Curl into a ball and hold your knees!"

"W-What? L-Like this?"

Without understanding why, he followed my instructions. And I chanted the spell.

"*Dyna-Brast (pseudo)!*"

Kokeen!

Moisture in the air gathered and then froze, sealing Raul inside a giant block of ice. Normally, *Dyna-Brast* would shatter the frozen target into pieces afterward, but I had modified the spell slightly to remove that part.

"Wait, Lina! What do you plan to do!?"

"Bludgeoning."

I answered Naga's question simply and used a following wind spell to lift him high into the air—

"Theeere it goeeees!"

I slammed him right onto the hydra! Thus—Raul fulfilled his long-cherished desire. He might not have felt a sense of satisfaction, but there was no doubt that "Raul defeated the hydra." I think.

"But Lina, wouldn't it have been better to freeze the hydra and let him defeat it?"

...!! That was a sharp jab for Naga.

"T-That was, you know, that." I held up a finger. "It's what you call a 'shift in perspective.'"

"I see..." Naga nodded convincingly.

"...But Lina, putting him in ice like that... he might be dead."

"It's fine. He'll be revived properly."

I answered Naga's question with confidence. Even I wouldn't freeze an ally without the confidence to revive them.

"Really?" Naga asked persistently. I said with full confidence:

"It's absolutely fine. I adjusted the power of the spell, and more importantly, it worked well when I experimented with a goldfish before."

"Well, we managed to clean things up."

"Hmph, now this town is at peace as well."

The battle was over, and we were at the mayor's house. Having finished the job, Naga and I were smiling. However, for some reason, the mayor and Raul, who had fulfilled his desire, didn't look very happy.

Raul seemed displeased that he had suffered full-body burns due to a slight oversight when the ice was melted. However, I had also cast a *Recovery* spell, so that was just an unforeseen accident—within the range of being laughed off. Probably. He was currently lying in the mayor's house, covered in bandages from head to toe.

"So, about the reward..."

"Do you think there'll be one? Something like that?"

The mayor answered my business smile with an unpleasant voice.

"Huh...?" Naga and I both frowned.

"Rolling a Golem into the middle of town... it's a huge loss. Truly..."

"No way! The fact that it only ended with this much when Naga was involved is practically a miracle!"

"...Lina... I'd prefer if you backed me up..."

"At any rate, the advance payment you received should be enough for necessary expenses! If anything, I'd like the deposit back!"

"Whaaa! That's too cruel!"

"And besides, the story goes that the one who dealt the finishing blow to the hydra wasn't you, but Raul-kun here. In other words, you failed the job!"

...

Dammit! I hadn't anticipated this line of logic!

"But, um, that's because!" I cast a glance toward the bedridden Raul.

"...That's how it is. No matter what, I was the one who defeated the hydra..."

I expected him to back us up for a second, but what came back was a cold remark.

This old guy... even though he was the original cause and did almost nothing, to get angry over a tiny, trivial accident... He was a narrow-minded person. Anyway, it was useless to say anything more here. Naga and I left the town in tears, having received almost no reward.

Afterward—

If the rumors on the wind were true, Raul was apparently kicked out of town before he even fully recovered. The story that he was the cause of the hydra commotion had spread. Of course, it was because Naga and I talked our heads off in the neighboring villages. As promised, we didn't tell anyone in *that* town.

What happened to him after that, no one knows...

A Request from Lina Inverse:

Please take responsibility when keeping pets.

(Hydra Warning: End)

The Silver Harp

Thud!
The shop door swung wide with a sharp, violent crash. A massive black shadow stood there, framed by the cold wind at his back. He was a hulking, bald brute of a man who reminded me of a stone golem.
With his grim facial features and the battle-ax slung over his shoulder—not to mention the impatient-looking crowd lurking behind him—I didn't even need to ask to know exactly what kind of person he was. He swept a menacing gaze across the modest interior of the shop and let out a rasping, overly loud roar.
"Any of you see a guy who looks like a minstrel around here? A flashy punk with long hair and a silver harp!"
A moment of silence followed, and then—
"I don't really care, but close the door, will you? The wind is blowing in and it's freezing."
Stir.
Tension rippled through the air in the shop, and every eye turned toward the owner of those words. Which is to say—toward me.
The man’s eyebrow twitched. Remaining where he stood, he grunted, "Heh... well, aren't you a feisty little pot-bellied stove."
"Who are you calling a pot-bellied stove!?"
"He means you. You."
The one chiming in was Naga, sitting across the table from me. She was wearing her usual "wicked sorceress" look, featuring a level of skin exposure that completely ignored the very concept of seasonal weather.
"I mean, when someone wears ten layers of sweaters and whatever else, anyone would see them as a pot-bellied stove."
"It’s cold, so I can’t help it! Besides, I’m only wearing nine layers right now! It’s not like it gets in the way of me moving around, so you’ve got no right to complain!"
"Doesn't get in the way...? Then who was it last night who tumbled down the stairs and was wriggling around because she couldn't get back up on her own?"
Urgh...!
"Th—that was because I was wearing fifteen layers then! And anyway, I don't want to hear about my outfit from someone like you who wears the same thing all year round!"
Even the frogs had long since given up and gone into hibernation, yet she didn't show the slightest hint of feeling unwell in that outfit. This had already transcended the level of mere "insensitivity."
"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! How green you are, Lina." She tossed her long black hair back with a flourish. "No matter what happens, one must stay true to their own fashion policy. That is what we call aesthetics."

"You just don't have the confidence to pull off normal clothes, do you?"
"Hmph. Mere off-the-rack clothes could never satisfy my sense of beauty."
Of course not. If the day ever came where clothes satisfying her sense of beauty became common, that would truly be the end of the world.
"...Well, setting that aside..."
The shopkeeper, who had been watching our exchange for a while, called out to the big man at the entrance with a strangely exhausted tone.
"I don't know anyone like that. I'll let you know if I see him..."
"—I see."
The man pulled a single gold coin from his pocket and tossed it toward the owner.
"My name is Gaml. I'm staying at the Silver Scale Inn. Let me know if you notice anything. Sorry for the intrusion."
Having said his piece, he left the shop without even glancing back at me.
"...We missed out on a mark, didn't we, Lina?" Naga said.
"That's because you had to go and chime in," I replied, sounding bored.
In short: I had been planning to provoke that group of thugs into a fight so I could knock them flat—killing two birds with one stone by relieving stress and refilling my wallet. Naga's interruption had washed that plan down the drain.
Plink-plonk, pling-pling.
"Phew. It seems they've gone."
"What!?"
At the sudden strange sound and voice, Naga and I instinctively jumped up from our chairs. It had definitely come from right beneath our feet—from under the table.
After a moment—
A minstrel clutching a harp crawled out from under the tablecloth. He looked to be around twenty years old. He was quite handsome, but he had an air of flippancy about him.
Plonk-pling, pling-plonk.
He strummed his harp out of tune and, for no apparent reason, seemed to be carrying roses as he spoke.
"Heh. It seems I've startled you, ladies."
Well, obviously. Anyone would be startled by that.
"You... you're the one those guys were looking for..."
Plink-plink-plonk.
"Yes. As you can see, I am a traveler. My name is Michael."
I didn't care what his name was, but did this guy really have to play the harp every single time he spoke? I glanced at the shopkeeper, who was washing dishes without looking surprised at all. He probably feigned ignorance to the thugs earlier just because he hated trouble breaking out in his shop.
"...So, how long have you been hiding there?"
To Naga's question, Michael looked into the distance with misty eyes.
"Heh... Yes—that would be—"
Pling-plonk-plink.
"I believe it was shortly before noon, my beautiful lady."

No... noon!? For the record, the meal we were eating now was a somewhat late dinner.
"Heh, though I ask that you do not misunderstand and think I fear those men. Faced with the Black Magic I wield, such people are of no consequence, but I simply do not care for conflict." He brushed back his long hair as he spoke.
"So, why are you being chased anyway?" I asked, giving in to my curiosity.
Plink-plonk-pling-plonk.
"Heh. Truth be told, that man—Gaml—is after this harp of mine. My little pot-bellied stove lady."
"You have no right to call me that either!"
"Oh, please don't be angry. I meant it as a compliment..."
...What kind of person in this world would be happy about being called a pot-bellied stove!?
"At any rate, I cannot allow a family heirloom passed down through generations to fall into the hands of such men."
The harp he held had a silver frame, with exquisite carvings centered around an embedded blue gemstone. I wasn't sure of its value purely as a musical instrument, but even as a work of art, it was hard to put a price on. A wealthy hobbyist would probably pay anything for it.
"Heh. And so—here is my proposal. You both appear to be sorceresses. If you would be so kind, would you act as my bodyguards?"
"Bodyguards... but didn't you say you could use Black Magic too?"
In response to my question, he strummed the harp yet again.
"Heh, that is indeed true. However, my spells are far too powerful and dangerous. Whether I wish it or not, using them inevitably inflicts more injury than necessary upon my opponent. Even if they are villains, I find it too pitiable. Besides, I am only human. If I am alone, a gap in my defense will eventually open. What do you say? Will you accept this request? As for the reward, let's see..."
Naga and I both widened our eyes at the amount he offered. Even after subtracting the external cold and the insult of being called a pot-bellied stove, it was an amount that left plenty of change. To put it bluntly, this was a sweet deal.
The very moment that thought crossed my mind—
BAM!
With another violent crash, the shop door flew open again. Standing there, predictably, was Gaml and his entourage.
"I knew you were here."
With a creepy smile on his face, he stepped boldly into the shop. His henchmen followed behind him. Well, well... it looked like I couldn't turn down this request now.
"I thought I heard the sound of a harp, so I decided to stop by..."
"B—boss, this is..."
"You keep your mouth shut."
Gaml barked at the shopkeeper, who had started to mutter something. He turned a sharp gaze toward us.
"Now, hand over that harp quietly..."
The instant he started to speak—
"Dime Wind!"

I unleashed the spell. It was a spell that simply generated a strong wind with virtually no lethal power, meant only to momentarily restrict an opponent's movement, but it was more than enough to whip up the tablecloth.
"Gwah!?"
Enveloped suddenly by the tablecloth, Gaml and his men fell into confusion.
"This way!"
Taking advantage of the gap, the three of us slipped through the door leading to the kitchen and opened the back exit. Outside was the air of a back alley, carrying its distinct, sickly smell.
"Hurry! This way!"
Not long after, Gaml and his men came swarming into the kitchen. Spotting the door swinging in the wind, he shouted, "They're outside! After them!" and rushed through the door into the night alley.
...For enemies, they certainly fell for a classic trick. After opening the back door, we had hidden ourselves behind the kitchen shelves. After watching them head outside, the three of us returned to the shop interior.
However, a single nasty-looking middle-aged guy was standing at the shop entrance! I see, he left one pawn behind just in case. The idea was good, but unfortunately, a single bottom-tier thug was out of his league!
"Hyah!"
Wham-crunch!
I delivered a flying kick as I ran up! Thug Number One went flying, spinning about three times before bouncing hard off the floor. Hmph. Easy.
We dashed through the doorway in one go. Behind us, I heard the shopkeeper's voice.
"Aaaah! Mr. Mayor! Hang in there!"
.....
"Lina... it looks like the person you just kicked over was the Mayor just passing by..."
At Naga's sharp observation, I tried my best to remain calm.
"...Well... my big sister back home always said that misunderstandings are a part of life..."
Pling-plonk-pling.
"I feel like that's missing the point..."
"Don't—don't play the harp! They'll notice us! ...Anyway, the priority right now is to get out of town as fast as possible!"
And so, we managed to escape Gaml’s pursuit. There might have been a few minor issues, but we'll just agree not to talk about those.

"Bwahahaha! I've finally found you, Michael!"
Laughing loudly for no reason, that man appeared around noon the next day. We were at a small eatery in a small village.
We had ended up camping out last night, and breakfast had been a light meal of travel rations. Since we wanted to eat something proper for lunch, we stopped at this shop—but just as we finished our meal and were about to leave, Michael, for some reason, decided to try and hit on one of the girls in the shop.

However, she was with a rather rough-looking man who started complaining to Michael. Just as a fistfight was about to break out, someone kicked the door open and swaggered in. Contrary to his arrogant tone, he was a short man in his thirties with a receding hairline.
"Luger!? Why are you here!?" Michael cried out in surprise the moment he saw him.
The short man wagged his finger. "Now, now, don't play dumb. I came all this way chasing you. ...Or rather, should I say 'the harp'?"
With a pretentious pose, he sat on a nearby table and pulled a cigar from his pocket.
"Now. You'll hand it over quietly, won't you?"
"What kind of nonsense are you talking?"
I was the one who stepped forward, of course.
"Go back and tell Gaml to give up on the harp."
Upon hearing this, the man’s expression turned to one of shock.
"Gaml!? Is that guy after the harp too!?"
...Eh?
"This man is not one of Gaml's subordinates," Michael whispered. "...Though it doesn't change the fact that he's after my harp..."
I see, so he's from a different group. Whatever the case, we should leave quickly—
"Let's run."
"Huh?"
I let out a dumbfounded sound at Michael's whisper in my ear.
"But wouldn't it be less trouble later if we just knocked him flat right now?"
"Heh. That is true, but if we fight now, we will involve innocent people."
Well... that was certainly true. Even if we fought and won here, the shop owner would probably grumble at us later. Since that was the plan, no time like the present!
"Naga! We're retreating for now! Do something to distract him, even for a second!"
"How passive... well, fine..."
Ignoring Naga's grumbling, I began to chant a spell. That single moment she distracted him would be the key!
Then, Naga’s voice rang out grandly!
"Vu Vraiwah!"
...Eh?
I froze involuntarily. Thud! The ground beneath us shook violently. The roar of a great beast echoed. Bursting through the floorboards were several giant stone dragons.
They were golems Naga had just created with her spell. Naturally, the shop fell into total panic. Michael collapsed in shock, the shop owner started foaming at the mouth, and the short guy named Luger had already vanished.
"Now! While we have the chance!"
"Don't give me 'while we have the chance'! You! How on earth are you going to follow up on this situation!?"
"You're the one who told me to distract him!"
"I did! But don't you know the meaning of 'moderation'!?"
"I don't!"
Damn! She said it with total confidence!

"A—anyway, let's just get out of here!"
And so—we managed to make our escape, more or less safely.

"They're here."
Naga muttered this just as our group reached a deep forest. I nodded and stopped walking.
It hadn't been long since we left the village after I somehow managed to dispose of Naga's rampaging stone dragons. Even though it was a forest, the leaves had almost entirely fallen, creating mounds of withered foliage on the ground.
Plink.
"Pursuers—are they?"
Michael's face twitched. I didn't care about his face, but he really didn't need to play the harp at a time like this.
"Why don't you come out? I know you're there."
Whoosh.
As if answering my voice, a gust of wind swept through. The wind swirled, kicking up the dry leaves—and then, in the center of that vortex, a single figure suddenly appeared. It was a thin, mage-like man wrapped in a cloak and robe.
"W—what was that just now!?" Naga cried out in surprise.
But I saw through the nature of that trick in an instant. At first glance, it looked like he used the legendary spell, Teleportation, but of course, that wasn't it. It wasn't an illusion either. Most likely—the mage had been buried still under the pile of dry leaves. At the same time we arrived, he used a weak wind spell to whip up the leaves and obscure our vision, then stood up in the confusion. It sounded silly, but I had to admit, the sheer guts required for such a bluff was impressive.
"Heh heh heh... I've found you, Michael..."
The mage spat out a textbook villain line.
"Y—you! Grenas!"
Michael cried out, forgetting even to strum his harp.
"Is he a face you know?"
He nodded at my question and whispered, "This man is also... one of those after my harp."
Even a mage was after it... what on earth was this harp?
"Now... hand over that harp quietly. If you do, I won't harm you. I can promise you that."
—It's always the guys who say that who attack the moment you listen to them. Regardless, I had no intention of listening to such nonsense! I pointed directly at the mage with a snap!
"Anyway! As long as Naga and I are here, I won't let you lay a finger on Michael!"
"Ho ho... how interesting."
The mage flashed a nasty grin. "Then let your body learn the folly of challenging the Jet-Black Destroyer, the mage Grenas!"
He began to chant a spell. That was fine, but "Jet-Black Destroyer"... honestly, man... giving yourself such a grand name... The awkwardness of losing badly after introducing yourself like that is equivalent to the feeling of telling a joke you think is a riot only to have no one listen.

Usually, guys like this are surprisingly weak, but it’s strictly forbidden to underestimate an opponent. The mage was chanting a "Wind" type spell. It didn't seem to have much lethal power, but...
"Dame Claw!"
The moment the magic was released, a strong wind whipped up around the mage. It swept up the dry leaves at his feet and, a second later, blew them toward us. It was nothing more than a slight variation of "Dime Wind." Its lethal capacity was near zero, so even if I took it head-on—wait?
"Get down!"
At my shout, Naga and Michael threw themselves onto the ground. A swarm of dry leaves whistled over our heads.
"What's wrong, Lina!?"
"That."
In response to Naga's question, I pointed to the tree behind us. Small silver glints were stuck in the trunk.
"Those are..."
"He sent a bunch of small blades riding on the wind. Kicking up the leaves was just a camouflage."
A pretty clever trick. It was a good thing I noticed the light shimmering between the leaves; if I had been careless and taken that wind head-on, I would have taken significant damage.
...Still, I wondered what he did with this spell during seasons when there weren't any dry leaves?
"Heh. Not bad. In that case, leave this to me." Naga stood up and began to chant a spell.
Meanwhile, I—
"Michael." I looked into his eyes. "Actually, I have a favor to ask of you."
"...I can pretty much guess what it is..." He sighed and reached out a hand to me. "You want me to help you up because you can't get up on your own, right?"
"...Ah, you figured it out?"
"...Exactly how many layers of clothes are you wearing...?"
"It’s a bit warm today, so I’m dressed lightly. Twelve layers."
I said this as I got up, but then I happened to listen to Naga's spell—
Thwack!
Without a word, I kicked her from behind.
"What are you doing! Suddenly!"
"Shut up! It's because you're chanting a spell like that!"
The spell she was chanting was "Howl Freeze." Simply put, it's a spell that stirs up a blizzard to damage the opponent. It's rarely a one-hit kill, but it's extremely difficult to dodge and comes with the bonus of restricted movement due to freezing. It's a very powerful spell, but... naturally, it also scatters a tremendous amount of cold air in the vicinity.
"It's already freezing out here, so what are you doing making it even colder!?"
"What are you talking about! Don't make such a fuss over this little bit of cold!"
"Shut up! Unlike you, I'm built delicately! Anyway, I'll finish this in one shot!"

I began to chant a spell. Immediately, the mage's face paled. A mage with a certain level of skill can tell the level of a spell just by hearing someone chant it, even if it's a spell they can't use themselves.
And the mage had realized exactly what kind of spell I was about to use.
"Gaav Flare"—A spell that relentlessly pursues its target and can turn even a Wyvern to ash in a single blow. There is, of course, no way to escape it.
I raised my right hand straight out to the side, then pointed at my opponent, followed by forming the hand signs with both hands—The signs—
"Aaaaaah! My clothes are in the way and I can't form the signs!"
"What the hell are you doing!?"
Crunch!
Naga's elbow slammed directly into the top of my head from behind.
"!"
I... it huwrts...
"After kicking me and talking so big, what is this pathetic display!?"
"But! My elbows barely even bend, so how am I supposed to knot the signs!?"
"Don't talk like it's someone else's fault!"
While we were arguing, Michael stepped forward.
"...Heh, it seems there is no other choice. Now, I shall show you! The ultimate secret of Michael’s Most Dangerous Black Magic!"
As he spoke, he suddenly pulled something out of his sack. ...A doll and a needle...
Poke.
He thrust the needle into the doll's chest area.
"Heh! Did you see that!? After continuing this ritual for three days and three nights, if I simply bury this doll at the entrance of the opponent's house, they will taste the agonies of hell! Aaaaah! Even though it is a spell of my own making, how terrible and dangerous!"
...Well, the sight of a grown man poking a doll with a needle was certainly "scary" and "dangerous" in its own way...
"So what...?"
Whistle...
A cold wind blew for a moment at the mage's retort.
"...No, well, you see..."
"Um, Michael..." Naga chimed in from the side. "Could it be that the 'Black Magic' you use is... just hexes...?"
"Heh... as you can see."
"What use is that here!?" I shouted, delivering a kick. In the process, I lost my balance and tumbled over again.
"How do you plan to resolve this situation using such a slow spell!? Have a little more awareness of the position you're in! ...Well, setting that aside, could you help me up?"
"....."
"Um... excuse me, but could you please not create your own little world over there? I'm starting to feel strangely lonely..." the mage Grenas said in a strangely apologetic tone.

I managed to get myself up. "Heh! Playtime is over! This time, I'll settle this with my own hands!"
Even to me, that sounded like a line from a villainous executive who keeps losing, but I decided not to worry about it.
"Ha! That's more like it!" The mage chanted a spell. A very simple wind spell.
Following that, I began my incantation. My spell was the easy and convenient "Flare Arrow," which required no poses.
The mage's spell was completed first. The generated wind whipped up the surrounding dry leaves, creating a vortex around him. I see. The massive amount of dancing leaves almost completely obscured the mage's form, and the wind would deflect the trajectory of incoming spells.
However—
"Flare Arrow!"
I unleashed the spell regardless. As the mage intended, it was caught in the wind and its trajectory shifted. But at that moment—
Fwoosh!
The wind vortex itself burst into flames. There was no need for an explanation. The excessive amount of dry leaves whipped up by the wind had ignited. To make matters worse, the wind fanned the flames, and the result—
Grenas, the Jet-Black Destroyer, suffered full-body burns and was successfully put out of commission.

"I've been waiting, Michael."
With a nasty smile, Gaml and his men blocked our path again just as our group emerged from the forest.
Pling-pling-plonk.
"Heh... it seems there is no choice but to settle this..." Michael said, as if singing.
Gaml, looking annoyed, spat on the ground (how vulgar) and barked, "Where do you get those lines? Hey, you girls over there. You're in the way, so move. You'll get hurt."
"Unfortunately, we can't do that." Naga and I stepped forward.
"You should give up on trying to snatch other people's harps, go home, and maybe polish that head of yours."
"Wh—! You brat! You talked about my head!"
...Apparently, he was self-conscious about it.
"Argh! Enough! We're taking it by force! Men! Knock them flat and take the harp!"
"Yeah!"
They let out a spirited cry and rushed toward us all at once. Hmph. Naive!
"Mega Brand!"
With one spell, Gaml's lackeys were blown away! They were nothing more than a disorganized mob. They might be enough to bully innocent civilians, but they were no match for me, Lina Inverse.
Only Gaml remained.

"...Wh—what a terrifying person..." Gaml's face changed color as he stared at me. Did he only just now realize my true power?
"...To think you'd involve your own companions in your spell without a second thought..."
...Oh...?
Now that he mentioned it, I was sure Naga and Michael were behind me...
I turned around fearfully. ...Ah. Just as I thought. Both of them were knocked out cold over there. ...I had a feeling there would be hell to pay later, but for now, that was a problem for future me.
I turned back to Gaml. "Now... what will you do? Are you coming too?"
Our gazes clashed—and naturally, Gaml was the first to look away.
"...I... I get it... You can have the harp."
Have it... what on earth was he talking about?
"But—please, at least pay me the interest?"
"...Huh...?" At Gaml's words, I let out a dumbfounded sound.

"Lina! You...!"
"Complaints later, Naga. This isn't the time for that."
I restrained Naga, who had snapped at me the moment she was revived by my "Recovery" spell, and then I closed in on Michael, who had also regained consciousness.
"What is the meaning of this, Michael?"
"Wh—what do you mean?" He asked back, his face a bit pale, perhaps noticing Gaml behind me.
"...Wait, Lina, what exactly is going on?" Naga interrupted.
"What's going on is that Gaml says he only came to collect a debt."
"A debt!?"
"...Or rather, since Michael has no ability to pay, Gaml was just trying to take the harp as collateral because it looked like it would fetch a good price."
"Heh. It is a fact that the harp was being targeted. I did not lie," Michael said shamelessly.
"In that case, were the man from lunch and that mage also chasing you to collect other debts?" Naga asked in disbelief.
He brushed back his hair and replied, "Heh. I suppose that would be the case..."
It's not "suppose"!
"I thought you two were just debt collectors from another group," Gaml said, scratching his head. "I figured you were hired to chase off other collectors in exchange for the harp... I never imagined a guy drowning in debt like him would actually pay to hire bodyguards."
Twitch!
At his words, my face contorted. No... now that I think about it... why did Michael start hitting on that girl at the eatery at noon...? If his goal was to "cause a scene and skip out on the bill in the confusion"...
"Ne—hey, Michael," I asked tentatively, a dark premonition in my chest. "In that case, the reward you promised to pay us..."
"Heh." He flashed a small smile and said in an entirely nonchalant tone, "Haven't you heard the saying, my lady? 'You can't wring water from a stone'..."

Snap!
After that—it goes without saying that Naga and I thrashed Michael until he was a tattered mess and handed him over to Gaml.
Watching Gaml's retreating back as he dragged Michael away, I prayed to the heavens from the bottom of my heart.
—God, please let a decent request come my way next time...

(The Silver Harp: End)

Chimera Terror

"Lina Inverse—isn't it?"

The old man called out to me while I was busy finishing a petty job and celebrating with a post-work afternoon snack—specifically, a frantic cake-eating spree.

His hair and thick beard were snow-white. He looked like a perfectly pleasant old grandfather, but a sharp glint dwelled within his eyes. Judging by his attire, he was likely a sorcerer.

"Yeah... that's right...?" I nodded after swallowing the mouthful of cake I was working on.

"I knew it! It's me. Me!" he said, sitting down next to me with a delighted, beaming smile.

"............?" I tilted my head in confusion. To be honest, I didn't remember him at all.

"Look, it's me. It's Diol!"

Diol... sounded like a name I might have heard before, or maybe not...

"Regarding that job the town mayor asked of you—this morning, early on, you headed out to the western mountains with one of your companions, didn't you?"

"...Yeah."

The old man suddenly puffed out his chest with pride. "The one watching you from near the fruit shop—that was me!"

"How was I supposed to know that!?" I screamed instinctively.

You get people like this sometimes. The type who believes that just because *they* know who someone is, the other person must obviously know them too. He wasn't exactly harmful, but he was incredibly over-familiar.

"Rumors reach even a town like this, you know... Though, some of them aren't exactly pleasant to hear. Moh-hyo-hyo-hyo!" He burst into a great laugh at his own joke.

...None of your business, old man.

"Anyway, when it comes to offensive magic, there is no one who can stand to your right. Isn't that so?"

"That's right," I declared without a hint of modesty.

For some reason, after a moment of silence, the old man continued.

"An... anyway... as you can see, I am something of a sorcerer myself, and I'm currently engaged in a bit of research. I've taken a liking to your superlative talent, and there's something I'd like you to help me with. What do you say? If you're willing, would you come to my place now? Naturally, I'll make it worth your while..."

"Hmm—" I thought about it for a bit.

If this were just another typical job, I would have flatly refused, but this was a different story. Usually, sorcerers are pathologically secretive about their own research. Therefore, the chance to actually witness someone else's work was rare.

On top of that, I'd get to observe his research just by helping out a little, *and* get paid. To put it bluntly, it was a delicious deal.

Of course, there was the possibility that this was a trap set by some thugs holding a grudge against me, but if that were the case, I could just beat them into retirement and be done with it.

"All right. I'll help you out," I said, nodding.

"Oh! Really! Then let's head off at once..."

"Wait just a second—" I restrained the eager old man. "I still have five cakes left."

"I entered this field because of my father's influence," Old Man Diol said while rummaging through things in his study, which was buried under books and experimental equipment. "My father was a sorcerer too... However, he fought the monsters and lost."

"I see..." I replied half-heartedly, sitting in a chair across from his desk.

"So I thought: is there no way to oppose the monsters? Powerful Black Magic? No, no, there are natural limits to the spells a human can use. In that case—I must create something capable of opposing them!"

He pulled out a scroll and untied the string.

"And this is what I came up with—this!" He unfurled it across the black oak desk with a flourish—

Kyudogooon! I felt my soul leave my body for a second.

"The Ultimate Super Chimera, Designation Pending Number One! By using a Brass Demon for the body, it can be given significant magical capacity and magic resistance," the old man continued his explanation calmly.

"...Ah... Aaaaaah..."

"The wings on the back and this neck are from a dragon. This allows for incredible eyesight and flight capability, plus a fire breath."

"Ah... U-Um..."

"This neck here is a Sea Serpent. With this, underwater activity becomes possible. Land, sea, and sky—it possesses truly almighty capabilities..."

"Listen to meeeee!" I finally managed to raise my voice.

"—Is something the matter?"

I pointed to one specific spot on the conceptual drawing of the finished product. "...What is this?"

"I didn't think it required an explanation?" the old man replied quite nonchalantly.

"Just answer me! That... thing between the dragon and the sea serpent—what is that!?"

"Why, naturally—" the old man said in a perfectly casual tone, "—that is your head, obviously."

Aaaaaaaah! I knew it!

"No matter how large the magical capacity is, it’s meaningless without a mouth to chant the spells and a head capable of mastering them."

I felt my consciousness "dark out" while still sitting in my chair.

Just imagine it! A swarm of giant chimeras with heads that look exactly like mine, spamming Dragon Slaves or something.

Before long, children on the street would look at me and say, "Hey Mommy, look! That lady looks just like a Chimera!" only for the mother to drag them away, saying, "Don't point!" That would become my daily life...

Aaaaaaaah! Just thinking about it!

To be honest, "shame that lasts for generations" doesn't even begin to cover it.

"T-This... consider this deal cancelled!" I managed to pull myself together and squeezed the words out.

"What... why do you refuse!?" the old man cried out in surprise.

"What do you mean 'why'!? Anyone with a brain could tell you why!"

"With you, we might even surpass the legendary demon beast Zanafar!"

I don't want to surpass that kind of thing in *this* kind of way!

"Besides, once the power of this Super Chimera is proven, it will undoubtedly cause a sensation. I'm sure your fans will increase too."

"Like hell they will! Even if you use a Copy Homunculus, having a bunch of chimeras with my face wandering around is nothing but a nuisance!"

"Don't worry. I won't use a Copy Homunculus; I'll use you yourself."

I see. In that case...

.....

"That's even worse!"

"Now, listen to me. In the Sorcerers' Guild I belong to, there's a cheeky young brat named Guran. He was bragging about some pathetic chimera he built, so I happened to tell him, 'That's not a real chimera.' Then he had the nerve to say, 'Then show me what a real chimera looks like.' So, I ended up answering, 'In six months, for sure.' If I were to make a copy of you now and try to make it learn spells, there's no way I'd make the deadline."

"That is entirely not my problem!"

"Now, now. Just think of it as doing a favor for an old man with not much time left..."

"I have no intention of throwing my life away just to do a favor for an old man!"

"...What a selfish girl..."

...Th... this old man...!!

"However, since you've already agreed to help, I'll have you keep your promise!"

The old man stood up. And so did I. Our glares clashed, sparks flying!

"If it's come to this, I'll have to use force!"

"Hah! You think you can beat me!?"

"Wisdom comes with age!"

"Bring it on!"

"Here I come, little girl!"

Dagaaaaann!

At that moment, the door to the study exploded! Through the thick, rising smoke, a single black silhouette stood tall!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've finally found you, Lina Inverse!"

"S-So you've finally shown up, you love-crazed sorceress!"

I instinctively took a step back. There she was, in her usual costume that ignored the fluttering snow. The one and only Naga the White Serpent! She used to be a sorcerer who called herself my rival, but lately, she’s degraded into nothing more than a troublesome "goldfish poop" following me around.

"Who... who are you calling love-crazed!?"

"You! I'm talking about you! ...Wait, this isn't the time. Anyway, Naga, good timing!"

"You left me behind in the depths of that cave... and you have the nerve to say 'good timing'!?"

"Never mind that! This old man is an evil sorcerer! So, we're going to take him down!"

"I see!"

Naga accepted my oversimplified explanation of the situation with ease and turned toward Old Man Diol.

"What part of me is an evil sorcerer!?"

With a line that showed not a shred of self-awareness, the old man slammed his palm onto the desk with a *bam!* He grabbed the conceptual drawing and shouted, "I'm just saying I want to build something like this and asking for cooperation!"

"And that itself is sufficiently warped!"

"...How... cool..."

.....

"Huh?" Our voices synchronized as the old man and I turned our eyes toward the source of the comment.

There stood Naga, her eyes moist with emotion as she gazed at the conceptual drawing.

D-Dammit! Naga's warped sense of style wasn't limited to just her clothes!

She suddenly marched over to the old man, grabbed his hand firmly, and said, "Hmph. If that's the case, I shall cooperate."

Wait. You.

"Wai—! Naga! What do you think you're doing!?"

"What do I think? It’s a wonderful idea. Why would you refuse?"

"Wonderful...? You... listen! This old man is trying to use *me* to build that thing!"

"Isn't that fine? You'll be taller, too."

"Don't look at things from that perspective! Besides, who would willingly want to become such an ugly chimera!?"

"...Hmph. You're still such a child, Lina." She swept her hair back pointlessly. "To think you can't understand the beauty of this design, overflowing with functional elegance! Don't you agree?"

Suddenly asked for agreement, the old man looked bewildered. "N-No, I'm not really one for design..."

"Naga! Whose side are you on anyway!?"

"Hah! Don't tell me you've forgotten, Lina! I am your greatest lifelong rival!"

"Gaaah! Don't suddenly become my rival whenever you feel like it, especially when you're always making me pay for your meals!"

"Calling it a 'whim' is rude. Please call it 'going with the flow'."

Is there even a difference?

"Anyway! I have no intention of becoming that thing! If you like it so much, why don't *you* become the chimera!?"

At my words, Naga clapped her hands together and stared intently at the old man with pleading eyes.

...Hey, hey...

I said it in the heat of the moment, but if by some mistake a person like *her* became a "Super Chimera," the level of nuisance she'd cause the world would increase by several orders of magnitude.

The old man thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, that won't do. It's a waste. Even though you have such a magnificent chest."

So you're saying my chest doesn't matter!? I wanted to grill him on that, but if he just nodded and agreed, I'd lose all standing.

In any case, for now, my only move was to escape. Slowly, slowly, I backed away, inching toward the door. However, Naga noticed and blocked the way.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I won't let you get away, Lina!"

Tch! I jumped back and unleashed a spell I'd been chanting toward the back wall just in case something like this happened.

"Damp Vlast!"

The wall crumbled with a roar. I dove into the gaping hole without hesitation.

I found myself in a fairly large laboratory. Rows of crystal cases of various sizes lined the room, and about a third of them were filled with nonsensical chimeras.

And—

There was already a guest in the back of the room. He looked to be around thirty. He was dressed like a sorcerer and was clutching an armful of documents and scrolls.

"Y-You!"

Old Man Diol, who had chased after me, pointed at the man with his eyes wide open.

"Guran! What are you doing here? ...I see! You were planning to steal my research, weren't you!"

"An acquaintance?"

As Naga asked this, the old man replied with veins popping on his forehead. "I told you earlier! He's the brat who acts like a big shot despite only being able to create pathetic chimeras!"

Old man, Naga wasn't there when you said that.

Apparently, this guy had sneaked in while the old man was out and was rummaging through things. When the old man came back with me, he must have been forced to hide here.

"Fuhahahaha! Now that I've been found out, it can't be helped! It's true that the chimeras I produce now can't match yours! However! With your know-how and techniques, I will create something that is more than a match for them!"

"To put it simply, it's 'plagiarism'," I noted.

"Please don't put it so simply!" Guran protested in a small voice. "Anyway, I'll be taking my leave now!"

"Moh-hyo-hyo-hyo! Fool! You think you can escape!?"

"I'll show you I can!"

As he spoke, Guran pulled out a bundle of ropes from heaven knows where and pulled them with all his might.

Guran.

The clusters of crystal cases tilted sharply and came crashing down toward us.

"Hyaoe-eeee!"

Gakyakyobyariiiin!

Crystals shattered, fragments flew. Guran must have tied the ropes to the cases beforehand. He had pulled them all down at once to create a barrier.

"Fuhahahahahaha! Farewell!"

Leaving behind a loud laugh, Guran exited through the back door.

"Blast! I won't let you!"

Before the three of us could give chase, several shadows blocked our path. The chimeras that had been sleeping inside the cases!

"Aaaaaah! My cute little chimeras!"

Cute...? Old man... what part of these things are you looking at to think that?

"Diol! Do something about these things, quick!"

At my words, however, the old man spoke in a panicked tone. "It's no use! Their adjustments aren't finished yet! They won't even listen to my commands!"

"Whaaaat!?"

The strength of each individual one probably wasn't much, but there were more than ten of them. Inside a room, I couldn't use flashy, indiscriminate area-of-effect spells, but if we took them out one by one, Guran would make his getaway.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Leave this to me!" Naga stepped forward again.

"You! Don't tell me you're thinking of summoning a golem or blowing everything away with a flashy spell again!"

"Hmph! I can analyze the situation too, you know!"

"I won't forgive you if you hurt my 'precious' chimeras!" the old man added selfishly.

"I know!" Naga said, chanting a spell.

Oh? This was...

"Sleeping!"

Huh. For Naga, that was actually quite...

.....

.....

When I woke up, it was the next morning.

"—But because of that, we let that Guran guy get away."

After tying up the chimeras that were still sleeping around us, I spoke to Old Man Diol. By the way, Naga was still snoring away. If she hadn't put us to sleep as well, this would have been settled long ago.

"No, there's no need to worry about that. I know where his house is anyway. Even if he plans to flee the town, the preparations should take quite a bit of time!"

"In any case, we can't afford to take our time. He might dispose of the stolen documents that serve as evidence."

"N-No matter how you look at it, that would be meaningless..."

"It's not meaningless. What if that man insists, 'I couldn't build the promised chimera, so he's making up false accusations about me stealing his research'!?"

"I... I see... All right. I'll lead the way! ...And, what about that lady?"

He glanced at Naga.

"Naturally, we're leaving her behind," I stated firmly.

"But, the more people we have..."

"You saw her 'skill'. Why would we want to confuse the situation further!?"

"...That's true. Let's go!"

It seemed he finally understood.

And just for the record, I hadn't forgotten about the "Horrible Super Chimera Project." There was a precise calculation at work: "I'll just let Guran be the villain, and in the process, let the chimera matter fade away into uncertainty."

Beyond the morning mist that had yet to dissipate stood a solitary house. Guran's dwelling was on the outskirts of town, right by a lake. It was a lake with an eerie atmosphere, with jagged, giant rocks peeking out from the water's surface. Whether because of that or not, there were no other houses nearby.

"Here, we can use spells as much as we want."

"No, I'd rather you didn't use big spells. Those stolen documents must be recovered safely..."

Old Man Diol overheard my mutterings and made his own selfish demands.

"I'll try my best, but... it depends on what the opponent does. Anyway..."

"Fuhahahahahaha!"

A sudden, loud laugh rang out, cutting me off.

"You've come, Diol!"

At the same time, a giant image of Guran's face appeared before the two of us.

"Mohyoe-eeeee!?"

The old man nearly collapsed in fright.

And for good reason. A face as large as a house was floating and swaying, talking to us. Furthermore, Guran was, to put it mildly, not exactly handsome.

At first glance, it looked like an ectoplasm, but this wasn't sorcery. It was just a setup of mirrors and crystal lenses projecting an image onto the morning mist. As for the voice, he was likely using a speaking tube or something similar.

I used to play with this kind of contraption a lot when I was little. I'd project scenes of my sister back home taking a bath onto other locations and charge the neighborhood boys a fee to watch. It was just a harmless childhood prank... until the day my sister found out.

...No, let's stop. I don't even want to remember what happened then.

Ignoring my momentary reminiscence and the old man's shock, Guran's face continued to talk unilaterally.

"You've kept me waiting! Taking a whole night's rest so you could attack when I was tired of waiting and exhausted... I must first praise you for such a brilliant strategy!"

...He was quite mistaken, but if I were to reveal the truth here, both sides would lose face.

"What you seek is here. But I wonder, will you be able to reach it safely? Do your best. Fuhahahahahaha!"

Following the pattern, Guran's face vanished along with his loud laughter.

"Watch out! He's up to something!"

"I know!" I replied and started walking. However—

Before I'd gone ten steps, I stopped dead in my tracks.

"What's wrong?"

"—Something—is coming!"

A black shadow approached, cutting through the morning mist.

"Is it one of his chimeras!?" Old Man Diol cried out.

It was massive. Its entire body was covered in coarse black hair, and it was about the size of a small carriage. I didn't know what animal it was based on, but it must have been a blend of over ten different species. It had become something that didn't resemble any known animal anymore.

"That fool! Just because you increase the number of synthesized parts doesn't mean it's better! He probably thought he was combining only the best traits, but he can't fool my eyes! Its lack of balance is glaringly obvious!"

"Spoken like a true chimera otaku!"

"...That said, the synthesis from the nape to the back is magnificent! How should I put it... it has this strangely alluring quality to it! Mohyo-hyo-hyo..." He wiped the drool from his mouth.

...Old man... hey...

"Regardless, it should stand up and attack with its front legs! At that moment, attack its back legs!"

"Got it!" I replied, chanting a spell.

The chimera let out a roar of intimidation and stood up, raising its front legs.

"Now!"

"Dragon Slave!"

Dochyooooooon!

"Hmph. Too easy."

"I told you to aim for the legs!"

"Who cares!? We took it down, didn't we!"

"No! I won't allow it! I can't forgive this! I won't accept this kind of 'ends justify the means' thinking that lacks policy or morals! The process along the way is also important! Do you understand!?"

"I... I get it! I get it, so stop strangling me...!"

"...Honestly... young people these days..."

"—Ah! While we were messing around, a second one came! Diol, what's its weakness?"

"That one... right! It has a weak stomach!"

"...I see... and what exactly am I supposed to do with that...?"

"J-Just kidding... I'll answer seriously, so don't strangle me...!"

...Honestly... old people these days...

And so, while knocking down the attacking chimeras one after another, the two of us approached Guran's house.

And finally—

"Fuhahahahaha! You've done well to make it this far! But this is the end!"

Guran himself finally stood in our way!

"You shall go no further! I can't have you trashing my house!"

...Another one with these selfish lines...

"So you've finally shown yourself! You thief! But now that your chimeras have been defeated, you're finished! Give it up!"

"Hmph! Don't get cocky just because you defeated my chimeras! Now, I shall show you! My other power!"

"Another power!?"

"Exactly! Witness my strongest offensive spell, Burst Flare!"

This guy can use *that* spell!? It's the strongest of the fire-based spells, with a power nearly ten times that of a Fireball. A ball of light forms at the target location, and the next moment, tongues of pale blue flame erupt. It’s a spell powerful enough to melt even a Stone Golem with ease.

"Know the foolishness of opposing me! I'll burn you down to the very bone!"

"Dill Brand."

Doaaaaann!

"...That's... cheating..." Guran groaned, twitching.

It's his fault for standing there giving such a pompous, long-winded speech.

"To attack in the middle of a finishing line... what a girl with no sense of aesthetics, morals, or chest..."

"Mega Brand."

Gobeeeeeeen!

"...I'm sowwy... I was wong..."

As long as you understand.

"...Or so you thought! Aqua Breathe!"

"What!?"

Where on earth did he have that kind of energy left? Guran suddenly chanted the spell that allows for breathing underwater and leaped into the lake.

"He got away!"

The lake's transparency was low. The sorcerer's figure, not even his shadow, was visible anymore. Only ripples lingered on the water's surface. There were spells to create large waves, but the impact on the lake bottom would be minimal.

"He escaped..." Old Man Diol muttered regretfully. "—Well, for now, his ambitions have been crushed. All that's left is to search the house, recover the documents, and go back to proceed with the Super Chimera Project."

Yikes! He remembered it perfectly! I... I have to smooth this over somehow... I know!

"No, you're being too soft!" I shouted, pointing my finger dramatically. "If you don't teach a lawless guy like that a lesson when you have the chance, he'll surely get cocky! If we let him go now, he'll definitely try the same thing again someday without learning his lesson! When you strike, you strike thoroughly! That's the ironclad rule of battle!"

"I... I see... but we can't even find him like this."

"Don't worry. Leave it to me!" I said, chanting a spell.

"Damp Vlast!"

Bagogaa!

One of the giant rocks peeking out from the water took a direct hit from my spell and shattered.

"Hey, hey... what do you plan to do by smashing rocks...?"

"This—is what I planned to do."

I pointed toward the water, where Guran's pathetic form was floating helplessly alongside some fish, knocked out by the shockwave.

"Wow, as expected of Miss Lina. Your skills are just as the rumors say."

While tying up Guran, who had lost both the will and the strength to resist, Old Man Diol praised me.

"Hmph. Naturally."

"Yes. As I thought, you are the only one fit for my Super Chimera!"

"Agh! You're persistent! I told you I don't want to!"

"What exactly are you unhappy about!?"

"Everything! Everything! And besides, for Prototype Number One, you don't necessarily have to use me..."

I stopped there as a certain idea occurred to me. Noticing my gaze, Old Man Diol shifted his eyes too...

"—I see."

He clapped his hands once and crouched down. "...Say, Guran, you could use offensive magic too, couldn't you..." He grinned with a creepy smile.

In the end—

I received a reward from the old man for helping him recover his documents. After that, I tied the old man up and handed him over to the authorities along with Guran, earning myself a bit of prize money. No matter how much he claimed it was purely for research, I couldn't just let such a dangerous old man run loose, could I?

Thus, one incident came to an end.

However, there was one thing that bothered me. Lately, Naga had been suspiciously obsessed with chimera research. I could only hope that she wouldn't suddenly suggest "remodeling" me...

(Chimera Terror: End)

The Blade Of Revenge

It was at an inn in a certain village that she first approached us.

"You're sorcerers, aren't you? Actually, there's something I want to ask of you..."

She looked to be around twenty years old. A beauty with long black hair. She was dressed like a warrior—if you could call it that. She wasn't wearing armor, but she carried an exotic longsword on her back, and a longsword and a shortsword were tucked into her waist.

"No."

My blunt, honest reply left her momentarily speechless.

"No, well... if you could just listen to the story..."

"I don't want to. It would be a waste of energy."

My flat refusal caused a look of pure shock to wash over her face.

"Wh-what... such profound technique...!"

Heh. I won.

Basking in a secret sense of victory, I went back to poking at my pork loin.

Basically, it went like this: if I had simply said "No thanks," she would have surely come back with a terrifying counter like, "At least listen, it won't hurt you, will it?" I had read that far ahead, and my answer made her realize her own defeat. Sure enough, she couldn't say another word and slunk away from us.

And so—

We left that village without further incident.

—Well—

Normally, the story should have ended there. (Some might argue, "Then what's the point of the story?" but peace is the greatest thing in the world, after all.)

Of course, that's assuming we didn't take a wrong turn along the way.

"This is strange... I feel like the more we walk, the deeper into the mountains we're getting..."

"It's not a 'feeling'! We are definitely deep in the mountains! Honestly... Naga, it's because you just absentmindedly trudge ahead!"

"Oh ho ho. I wonder who exactly was walking in front?"

Ugh...!

"Anyway... well... regardless, right now we should talk about the future rather than looking back at the past!"

"Fine. Whatever. In any case, even if it's not a town or a village, we have to find somewhere to shelter from the snow... it's beyond freezing."

I wanted to tell her to wear proper clothes then, but now wasn't the time for a fruitless bickering match. To begin with, it was a mistake to believe the innkeeper when he said, "It won't snow today," and decide to push on to the next village. Thanks to the snow that had been falling until yesterday, the whole area was a world of silver. It seemed that while we were charging ahead, we had unknowingly wandered off the highway and onto a mountain path.

The moment I realized we were lost, I could have handled it by using Levitation or something to look around from above. But—

Before I could put that into action, it suddenly started snowing. The reason I didn't do it immediately was simple: Naga and I were too busy trying to pin the blame for getting lost on each other. You know, "female friendship" and all that.

Maybe not.

Anyway, visibility became quite poor, so even if I went up into the sky, there was no way I'd be able to see a village. Even if we tried to turn back now, the footprints would likely be gone in this snowfall.

"This snow is to blame for everything! This snow! Honestly... starting to fall without even asking me first... Mama didn't raise you to be such a child!"

"...Stop grumbling nonsense and think of something, Lina."

"If I had an idea, I would have—wait—"

"What is it?"

"Look... over there..."

Where I pointed—beyond the white, hazy forest—a massive, black shadow lay across the landscape.

It was a large fortress. It must have been quite old. It was weathered, but not ruined. Except, that is, for the front gate.

"...What's the meaning of this...?"

Peering inside from the doorway, we stood there in a daze for a moment. The great oak doors lay fallen at our feet, still smoldering. Beyond them were the corpses of ghouls and zombies lying in heaps. Well, zombies were already corpses, but that didn't matter right now. Someone had raided a sorcerer's hideout—that was the likely situation, but...

"Anyway—let's go!"

I urged Naga forward and ran into the manor without hesitation. Inside was much like the outside. The only difference was—

Clang... shing...

The sound of blades from somewhere!

"That way!"

I started running again.

The battle was reaching its climax.

Clang!

She managed to catch a blow from a buster sword above her head, but the "Armor" seemed to have superior power. Unable to withstand it, she dropped to one knee. Following up, a kick from the "Armor" struck her chest.

"Guh!"

Her breath hitched, and her stance completely crumbled. Not missing the opening, the "Armor" swung back for a thrust—

Zing!

That was the exact moment my spell pierced the "Armor's" chest. After a moment of paralysis, the "Armor" collapsed onto the floor with a heavy metallic thud.

Just as I thought—it was empty inside. A Living Mail, possessed by a low-level spirit. Perfect for a sentry. Assuming the opponent can't use magic that interferes with the Astral Side, that is.

"Ah—!"

Breathing heavily, she looked toward us. It was the woman warrior who had approached us at the eatery yesterday at noon.

"You guys!? Why—!"

...I couldn't tell her we were lost.

"Heh... call it a mere coincidence."

"You probably got lost."

Gah.

"That's... that's not it at all! Right, Naga?"

"That's... that's right. There's no way such a pathetic story could be true. Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Regardless, you saved me. Thank you. I'm really not good with those 'Living Mail' things..."

I suppose so. To defeat one with normal weapons, you have to put some serious soul into it and bash it incessantly.

"After all, if you strike them poorly, you'll nick your blade; no matter how much you cut them, no blood sprays; and they don't writhe around in agony... It's just... so unrewarding."

...What a bloodthirsty woman.

"Th-that aside, what are you doing in a place like this?"

At my question, her expression darkened.

"The sorcerer here... he's my father's murderer."

"His... murderer?"

I grimaced openly.

"A murderer? Don't tell me your drunk father hit a passing sorcerer and that's how it started..."

"What kind of world do you live in where that happens?"

She looked at me as if I were an idiot.

"My father was a sorcerer..."

Her eyes turned lonely as she began to tell her story bit by bit. About six months ago, her father, who was researching demons, was killed by an acquaintance—a sorcerer named Kern—and his research was stolen. She had learned that the sorcerer was hiding near that village and tracked him down, but she was worried about facing him alone. She could use simple fire-based spells, but the opponent was a professional sorcerer. It was different from dealing with zombies.

—And that was why she had approached us, but...

"I suspect this heavy snow was ordered by him through a demon because he noticed my approach."

"I see... which means in the end, the fact that we got lost is entirely the fault of that sorcerer and the demon. —But if that was the case, you should have just said so from the start..."

"You wouldn't even listen!"

"Well, anyway... if that's how it is, we'll help you out. I'm Lina. And this is Naga. Nice to meet you."

"I see... based on the construction... the one with the Zephilia-made shortsword is Lina, and the one with what looks like a kidney dagger tucked behind her waist is Naga."

What a strange way to tell people apart. In this situation, I thought the normal way would be "the intelligent-looking beautiful girl (me) and the weirdo (Naga)," but...

"Nice to meet you too. I'm Lemmy. And this one is..."

She thrust the longsword in her hand forward with a sharp *shing!*

"My beloved sword, Jack-kun. Born in Reizelle. And the shortsword at my waist is Ripper-kun, made in the Duchy of Dils. The line of the blade is just adorable."

...Hey now...

"And you see, the exotic one on my back is Karma-kun. It has such a beautiful line, doesn't it? Oh. And also..."

From there—

From her bosom, her sleeves, and her backpack, she pulled out nearly twenty bladed weapons of various sizes, introducing the name and place of manufacture of each one with a truly delighted face.

—Th-this person... is a blade maniac!

You see them sometimes. People with these dangerous hobbies. Those who buy knives incessantly with no purpose for using them, or those who stand in the kitchen knife section of a general store grinning to themselves! If it's just for a collection, it's fine, but in Lemmy's case, I felt like she had already crossed the final line...

"Just imagining using Karma-kun here to go *slash* and kill that sorcerer who murdered my father... *te-he... te-he-he-he...*"

...She's definitely over the limit.

Her eyes have changed color. Miss, you're scary.

"—Now then, that's enough for introductions. Let's hurry."

I doubted whether that could be called an introduction, but Lemmy pointed toward the back room.

"Heh, and where do you think you're going?"

Naga stopped her right there.

"...Eh? Where... well, we have to go forward for now..."

"Heh. This is why amateurs are trouble."

Naga shrugged her shoulders.

"This type of fortress is designed to make intruders take the long way around. However, it's usually built with various obscure shortcuts to make it convenient enough for the people living there. —Yes—for example—"

She went back one room and pointed to a window facing outside.

"Over there. If we go out from the terrace, it should be the courtyard. It's overgrown with trees and visibility is poor, but if we cut through it properly, it should be a major shortcut."

She stepped outside without hesitation. I stopped just before the terrace.

"Oh, right, Lemmy, there's something I need to tell you..."

"What is it?"

"The things growing in the garden—those are all man-eating plants, so be careful."

"Hieee!"

"...It's true. Naga is being eaten."

"Right?"

"But... shouldn't we help her?"

"...I guess. Should we...?"

"Man-eating plants... I wonder if they're satisfying to cut."

"I don't know! I don't care!"

Regardless, through this and that, the party eventually reached the inner depths of the fortress. A large door stood before us. If things followed the usual pattern, the sorcerer should be behind it.

"Here we go."

I kicked the door open.

Bam!

It was quite a large study. Bookshelves lined the walls, and piles of documents and scrolls were scattered on the shelves nearby. And—

At a large desk facing the door sat an old sorcerer with a book in his hand!

"We've cornered you!"

I pointed dramatically at the sorcerer. —However—

He continued to read the book spread out on the desk in silence.

...He didn't notice us at all.

The timing couldn't be worse. What happened to the dramatic impact of my pointing finger?

"...Heh. You're still a child, Lina. Your performance is weak."

Saying something nonsensical, Naga stepped forward boldly. Placing both hands on her hips and thrusting her chest out, she shouted:

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! We've cornered you, old man! Now you'd better prepare yourself!"

—Finally, even the old man noticed Naga's high-pitched idiot laugh and slowly looked up. His hair and his beard were pure white.

"...Ah... what is it...? Who might you all... be...?"

"...Lemmy."

At my prompting, she gave a small nod, stepped forward toward the old sorcerer, and—

Suddenly bowed politely.

"I'm sorry. I have the wrong house."

...Wait. You.

"Honestly... what was that all about? All that effort..."

I grumbled as we walked along the snow-covered path (?). After leaving the fortress where the old sorcerer lived, we decided to go back and start over. We were currently on our way back to the village, guided by Lemmy.

"...In the first place, it's that old man's fault for living in such a misleading place. Honestly... I'll cut him..."

Whether she heard me or not, Lemmy spoke while nodding deeply. No, I meant to blame *her*...

She said it in a joking tone, but her eyes weren't laughing at all.

...You're seriously scary, lady.

"By the way, Lina-san, Naga-san, I'm asking again, but could you lend me a hand with my revenge? Even though that was the wrong person, there's no doubt that Kern is near here... —Of course, I'll make sure to reward you properly."

The two of us looked at each other and gave a small nod at the same time.

"Heh. If you ask that much, I suppose I have no choice. I, Naga the White Serpent, shall lend you my strength."

"Same here. Now that I've heard the circumstances, I can't just leave it alone."

Of course, the real reasons were different. First, unless we defeated the demon and stopped the snow, we wouldn't be able to move anyway. Second, I felt that if I said "No thanks" here, Lemmy would start swinging her sword and go on a rampage.

"—Well, so don't worry, Lemmy. Now that Naga and I are seriously on the case, friends and foes alike are toast."

"Th... that 'friends and foes' part..."

"Ah, no, no. Half of it was just a figure of speech, don't worry about it."

"I see... so, Lina-san, Naga-san, there's something I absolutely must tell you..."

"What?"

"I'm lost."

...I knew it... you...

The snow showed no signs of stopping.

"Cold. So cold. It's cold."

I muttered nothing but complaints while wrapping myself in my cloak.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

There was also someone who was more confused than usual due to the cold and was laughing incessantly. And Lemmy was walking silently, swinging her unsheathed sword for no reason.

...Thinking about it, it might have been quite a scary sight, but for now, the people involved had other things to worry about.

"Lemmy-saaaan... let's just give up on going back to the village... let's just burn down the forest around here with a Fireball or something and get warm..."

My brain was almost frozen when I made the suggestion, but she shook her head.

"Let's walk... just a bit more... I refuse to rest in a place like this where there's nothing to cut..."

"But if we stay like this, we'll freeze—"

"—Wait! There's something over there!"

She interrupted me and pointed ahead—to a large, black shadow.

"Lemmy... if that turns out to be that old sorcerer's house from before, I'm going to beat you half to death..."

"It's different. That's—a tower! ...Anyway, let's go!"

Indeed—

It was quite a large tower. It loomed blackly in the snow, radiating an eerie atmosphere.

"This is—"

Looking up at the height of the tower, Lemmy spoke.

"Yes—that's it! There's no mistake! This tower is where the sorcerer who killed my father lives!"

"Are you suuure this time?"

Faced with my piercing gaze, she looked me straight in the eye.

"It's fine. If it's wrong, I just have to apologize again. Leave it to me."

"...But I'm charging extra for that."

"Well... anyway, let's try talking to him first."

As she spoke, she went to the front and knocked on the door.

—It was largely as I expected; even after she continued knocking for a while, there was no answer.

"Anyway—let's go in."

Nodding at Lemmy's words, I began to chant a spell.

"Dam Brass!"

Boom!

The oak door was shattered quite easily.

"...You didn't have to break it..."

"Well, I don't know a spell to unlock things."

I answered Lemmy's murmur. Of course, if I studied a little, I could easily use that kind of magic, but I didn't want to. I have the skills and tools to open a simple lock without magic, and more importantly, if a door has to be opened anyway, it's more exciting to blast it open with an attack spell.

Regardless, the priority was to get out of the cold. The party tumbled inside without hesitation.

The interior was incredibly dark. I chanted the "Lighting" spell and cast it toward the ceiling to illuminate the room. It felt more like a lobby than a room. At the far end was a staircase leading up. To the left and right of the landing stood three sets of plate mail each. Further forward were two stone statues slightly larger than a human. It was a layout that practically screamed, "Heh-heh-heh. I'm going to start moving when you get close."

I wanted to warm up somehow, but looking around, there was nothing that looked like firewood.

"...I guess it can't be helped, then..."

Just as I was about to start chanting a spell—

"Who are you...?"

A low, heavy voice echoed. The voice came from one of the stone statues standing before us. I didn't know if he used magic or if there was a speaking tube installed, but either way, it was clearly meant to intimidate.

"Who are you...? What have you come here for?"

"That voice... Kern!"

It was Lemmy who cried out.

"...You know me!? Me?"

"Have you forgotten!? Me!? The daughter of the man you killed!"

"I see... that voice! The daughter of Gulzam!?"

"That's right—I've finally found you. Prepare yourself! I'm going to cut you *swish* with this sword! *Swish-swish*. ...He-he-he-he..."

I told you, stop that kind of laughing.

"Interesting... it seems you've brought companions... I am on the fifth floor of this tower. I wonder if you can make it this far? Well, I shall wait without expectations..."

With that, the voice cut off.

"I knew it... he was here..."

With an expression of rage, Lemmy glared up at the ceiling. Perhaps in her mind, she was seeing the image of the sorcerer Kern looking down on her with a defiant smirk.

"Let's go! Lina-san! Naga-san!"

"Ah, wait. Before that, if we don't warm up, we won't be able to move properly. And—if we let Naga keep laughing like that, it'll be too distracting."

"...True..."

She looked at Naga with a disgusted gaze. I haven't mentioned it every time, but Naga was still continuing that distinctive laugh.

Anyway, I chanted a spell.

"Flare Arrow!"

I released it toward the stone statue that had been speaking just now. The part of the statue that was hit turned red for a moment but soon returned to its original color. I followed up with another one, this time a "Flare Lance." The result was the same.

"...What were you trying to do?"

"Well, try getting close."

Lemmy stepped tentatively toward the stone statue and—

"...It's warm."

"Right? Oh, don't touch the statue. You'll get burned."

The method of hitting rocks with fire magic to heat them up is actually quite useful. I especially recommend it for cooking. If you put fish or meat on a rock heated this way, the excess fat drops off, which is very nice. ...Well... if you heat the rock too much, the ingredients might burst into flames the moment you put them on...

That aside.

"By the way, Lemmy, what have you been looking around for?"

"No... I just wondered if there was anything to cut..."

Look... you...

"I mean, people get really irritable if they haven't cut something for a while, right?"

They don't. Normally.

"Those man-eating plants earlier, they lacked... how do I say it... resistance. Don't you think they should have been a bit more... *gristly*?"

What is this "gristly"? Please don't ask for my agreement. I wanted to get away from this grim topic, but...

"That aside, Lemmy, your father..."

"Yes?"

"He had a name like a villain."

"...I'll cut you..."

Ah! She's mad!

"No, not that, I mean, is the sorcerer upstairs reasonably strong?"

While warming myself with the radiant heat from the stone statue, I asked her.

"Yes... he should be able to use spells decently, but the bigger problem is likely the demon he's keeping."

"But... even if it's a demon, it's probably just a Lesser Demon or a Brass Demon at most. If so—"

"But that's not it... In the research my father was doing, there was a technique to summon another lower-class demon from the Astral Side and have it possess a lower-class demon..."

"Yikes!"

"It should be a tough opponent. —But..."

She drew the longsword from her back and gazed rapturously at the blade.

"As long as physical attacks are effective, I will definitely defeat it with this sword... *he-he-he-he*... come to think of it, I've never cut a demon before..."

She's scary. Seriously.

Anyway, we waited until our bodies had warmed up to a certain extent before beginning our march.

The welcome was very mundane. Zombies, ghouls, skeleton warriors. Living Mail and low-level ghosts. The stone golems I expected appeared too. ...That sorcerer named Kern seemed to lack creativity.

Regardless, the party mowed down the cliché guardians one after another and easily reached the fifth floor of the tower. Waiting there was the sorcerer Kern and a single Brass Demon!

"Hi, we're here!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! For all your big talk, your underlings were quite disappointing!"

"Prepare yourself... Kern... I'll cut you with my own hands..."

Yes, yes, I get it, Lemmy, just stop licking the blade. It's a bad influence on the kids.

"Heh... talk big while you still can! The three of you are no match for this one creation of mine! Go! My masterpiece, the Brass Demon, Zeylagua!"

Gaaaaah!

The moment the demon let out a roar, our vision suddenly brightened. No—this was—!?

The demon had manifested nearly a hundred "Flare Arrows"! What incredible magic capacity!

Shoooooom!

The Flare Arrows literally rained down on the three of us!

"Waaaah!"

I barely managed to cast a wind barrier in time; Naga was somehow dodging through pure luck; and—

"Heh! This is nothing!"

Lemmy sheathed the longsword she had drawn and put her hand on the naginata on her back.

"Gufuuzan!"

With a focused shout and a flash of steel, her naginata—drawn in an Iai style—slashed through every single Flare Arrow raining down on her! Incredible!

Poof.

Thud.

Lemmy was enveloped in flames while still in her victory pose and collapsed.

...Ah. I see.

Thinking about it, it was obvious. Unless it's a magic sword, if you cut a "Flare Arrow" with a normal sword, the blade just passes through the fire. Cutting everything isn't always the answer. Since the firepower was somewhat dispersed, she probably wasn't dead.

For now, leaving her aside—

"Ra-Phas Seed!"

Whish!

The demon's movements stopped. It was Naga's spell that stopped it. Originally a spell used by high-ranking priests, it could easily stop an opponent like a Brass Demon. Assuming, of course, it was a *normal* Brass Demon.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! ...Oh?"

Graaaaaah!

Interrupting Naga as she was about to say something, the demon roared again and began to move.

"Then how about this!? Laguna Blast!"

As I released the spell, pillars of darkness erupted around the demon, and plasma extending from them seized its body!

Gegoboaaaah!

The demon let out a scream of agony. However!

"I won't let you! Flow Break!"

The spell released by the sorcerer in the back weakened the pillars of darkness.

Garoaaaah!

With a great roar, the demon shattered the weakened pillars of darkness.

He's good! Then!

"Naga! Dam Brass! Aim for the same spot I do!"

"Got it!"

She nodded and synchronized her chant with mine.

"Useless, useless!"

The sorcerer laughed loudly behind them.

"Do you think such spells will work against this Zeylagua!?"

They certainly wouldn't work on him. But on *this*—

"Dam Brass!"

My spell exploded on the stone ceiling above the demon's head. A split second later, Naga's strike hit!

"Oh... crap...!"

By the time the sorcerer realized, it was too late.

Cr-crack!

Splat.

The collapsing ceiling struck the demon and the sorcerer directly. This was also a perfectly valid physical attack. This demon might have been magically enhanced, but it seemed its physical strength remained unchanged. It didn't move an inch.

"AAAAAAAAHHH! How could you!"

The one who suddenly raised a loud voice was Lemmy, who had revived at some point. She rushed to the demon buried under the rocks and suddenly started rubbing against its body.

"I wanted to cut it! I wanted to try cutting it!"

...She was a real handful.

"...Lina-san..."

She murmured softly and stood up unsteadily. ...Hah! No... could it be!?

"I wanted to cut it!"

"Waaah! I get it! I get it, so stop swinging that sword!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

And so, one story came to an end. After waiting for Lemmy to calm down, the party left the tower.

—However—

The snow hadn't stopped at all.

"...Lemmy...?"

"...Well... it seems this snow... had nothing to do with the demon after all..."

.....

"Aaaah! The village! Where is the village!?"

"I'll cut it! If it's come to this, I'll cut everyone!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho..."

And the three of them continued to trudge through the freezing snow forever...

(The Blade Of Revenge: End)

Apprentice Days

"Wow, hey, hey! You guys are traveling mages, right?"
The person who called out to me with such excessive cheerfulness was a woman with long, black hair. Based on her looks, she seemed just a bit older than me. She was quite a beauty with wide, clear eyes. Judging by her outfit, she appeared to be a mage-in-training.
"We are, but...?"
I tossed the last morsel of cheesecake into my mouth and gave a small nod. By "we," I meant myself and Naga—who was currently sitting across the table, gulping down vodka from a giant mug.
"Hey, hey, actually, I was hoping you could help me with something..."
...Another job request, I thought to myself.
Lately—well, not just lately—it felt like I hadn't been getting any decent job offers. I wondered if it was just my imagination.
"My name’s Claire. As you can see, I’m working as an apprentice mage. See, I’ve got this report assignment, and it’s turned into a real headache. Since you’re traveling mages, I figured you must be pretty skilled! I wanted to ask for help, but my friends aren't really reliable... I’ll pay you well, of course. You’ll take it, won’t you?"
She just kept rattling on, completely one-sided.
"Hmph... We don't come cheap."
Naga suddenly chimed in with her usual unnecessary commentary. The way she said it made it sound like we’d take the job as long as the price was right.
"After all, we are two top-class mages, in both name and reality."
"In name and reality...?"
Claire-san paused for a moment, deep in thought.
"A female mage whose name carries weight... Ah!?"
She suddenly clapped her hands together.
"Could it be... Lina Inverse!?"
"Heh. Good guess."
I couldn't help but widen my eyes in surprise.

"Well, sure! I've heard the rumors, and you fit the image I had in my head perfectly. I'm actually a huge fan of yours! You have to give me your autograph later."
As she spoke, she firmly grabbed Naga's hand.
Wait, she got it wrong.
"...Excuse me..."
"Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to ignore you. Is this girl Lina-san's attendant?"
"Hmph. 'Attendant' is actually quite accurate."
"Who is!? Listen, Claire-san, I'm Lina! That one over there is Naga—she's just a goldfish poop following me around!"
"Who are you calling goldfish poop!? I am your greatest and most powerful rival for life!"
"Nobody even remembers that anymore! Give it a rest!"
While we were bickering, Claire-san watched us with a blank, stunned expression.
"Eh... That one is Lina-san...? Your image is so different from what I expected."
"...Is it?"
"Well, you know, based on the rumors, I pictured Lina-san looking like a real piece of work—an evil-looking mage wearing unnecessarily revealing clothes."
"Don't look at me for agreement!"
"In what way do I look like an evil mage!?"
Naga shouted, clearly having zero self-awareness.
"Don't get mad... Sorry if I offended you. I'm just honest, so I tend to say whatever's on my mind."
...Hey now.
"Oh, but really, the fan thing is true. My favorite episode is definitely that one. You know, where you summoned lightning and burnt the city of Kuruasar to a crisp."
"I didn't do that! I never did anything like that!"
"Eh? Really?"
"I'm telling you, I didn't! Seriously!"
"Aww... You're not as great as the rumors say... I got my hopes up for nothing."
This girl... What on earth was she expecting from me?
"Anyway! Claire-san, was it? A mage's report only has real value if you complete it through your own strength!"
Of course—my honest feeling was that I had no desire to spend my time helping an apprentice with a report.
To explain, there are various rankings among mages. To be promoted from "Apprentice" to "Mage," one must complete several reports. Only when a Master recognizes them does one become a full-fledged mage. After that, your rank goes up as you achieve more results. A higher rank means better treatment within the Association and access to different types of books. If you rank up by having someone

else do the work, you might get treated better, but when you look at a high-level grimoire, you won't understand a thing. It would be completely pointless.
"Ah, no, no! It's not that I want you to help with the report itself. My task is to investigate a nearby castle and submit a report on it, but the rumor is that the castle is inhabited by a Vampire."
"A Vampire!?"
I raised my voice instinctively.
Vampires—among the Undead, they boast top-class power and fame. They possess immense magical power and vitality that far exceeds a human's. Though, of course, they have no human rights. Well, they have plenty of weaknesses, so for a reasonably experienced mage, they aren't enemies worth making a huge fuss over. They turn to ash if they hit sunlight. They burn quite easily. And occasionally, you find one that's incredibly weak. When you think about it, they're a pretty spineless bunch.
"Hmph. If you're trembling at the thought of a mere Vampire, you're certainly still a novice," Naga said, sweeping back her long black hair.
Indeed, for us, a Vampire was no threat, but for an apprentice-class mage, it was a significant menace.
"But did you choose that assignment yourself?"
"No way. If I had, I'd have picked something much easier. My Master gave me this assignment."
"Does that person know about the Vampire rumors? ...Good grief. What were they thinking, giving you such a dangerous task...?"
"Hmph. It's obvious," Naga replied to my murmur. "It's either harassment, or they're intentionally giving you an impossible task to wait for you to come crying for help, so they can demand something unsavory in exchange..."
"...Ah. Now that you mention it..." Claire's eyes wandered toward the ceiling. "Master Graham is always giving me the eye. I was even invited to 'come over and play' tonight... I felt like I was in danger, so I turned it down."
I see... You find them sometimes. People who use their position of authority to try and satisfy their own desires! And when things come to light and they're questioned, they brush it off with a single word: "Training." Such a person doesn't even deserve to be called a Master.
"For someone like that, Claire-san, you should just blast them with a Flare Arrow or something without hesitation. There's no need to hold back. —Actually, shall we all go over there right now and knock that Master flat?"
"Hmph. When it comes to backstabbing and sneak attacks, few can surpass Lina."
"...I'm going to get angry... Naga..."
"What!? And here I was praising you!!"
"That wasn't praise!"

"Oh, wait a sec," Claire-san interrupted. "That would be bad. I mean, knocking her flat might be easy right now, but it would be boring if she started spreading rumors that I was just throwing a violent tantrum because I couldn't finish my report."
"I suppose so..."
"So, whether we're burning down the whole town or whatever, I have to finish the report first, otherwise it just sounds like an excuse. Well, anyway, as for that castle... I'll guide you there tomorrow. You guys were planning to stay here until tomorrow morning anyway, right?"
"Wa... Wait a minute, Claire-san." I hurriedly called a halt to her words.
"Yes?"
"What do you mean 'I'll guide you'? We haven't said anything about taking this job yet. ...And besides, what about the reward?"
At my words, she furrowed her brows. "Eeeehh!? I thought it was decided that since you want to knock my Master flat, you'd help with this for free?"
"Who said that!? And when!?"
"...Fine, I guess it can't be helped... Here, take this as a down payment for now."
As she spoke, she took something from her pocket and pressed it into my hand.
...Two copper coins.
"...What... is this...?"
"The down payment, like I said," she stated matter-of-factly.
"Listen here! Who in their right mind is going to storm a Vampire's lair for this!?"
"Eeeehh!? But they say Lina Inverse would destroy a whole town for a single copper coin..."
"...Who said that...?"
"No... it's just what I thought... Am I wrong?"
"You're wrong!"
At my words, Claire-san took on a disappointed expression. "Oh... How boring..."
This girl... What on earth did she think I was?
"But—I'm still just an apprentice mage. I don't have a sponsor or anything, so if you ask for too much..."
"...Fine... How much can you pay?"
"I can manage... maybe six silver coins!"
"Let's move on to the next town, Naga."
"Hmph. Agreed."
"Aaaahhh! Wait a minute! ...I know! There are rumors that the Vampire in the castle has been collecting all sorts of treasures. You can just take all of that home with you! Let's do that! Right? It's not my money anyway, so I don't care."
"Hmm..."
"A Vampire's treasure, huh..."

Naga and I tilted our heads. We had fought Vampires several times before, but as you might expect from that world, there are a lot of eccentrics. Some of them have very strange collections. Once, I even got dizzy after finding a treasure room packed to the brim with haniwa clay figures. In a way, it was the most terrifying attack I'd ever faced. If I were purely after loot, it would be safer and more certain to target bandits, who at least have a normal sense of value.
"The legend says he was originally a lord who became a Vampire after getting obsessed with the dark arts, so I think he’s hoarded some treasure..."

"I see... Well, if that's the case, I don't mind taking the job..."
"Hmph... Sorry, but I'm out," Naga said abruptly.
"Why? All of a sudden..."
"It's obvious! Is there a single instance where I've teamed up with you on a story like this and actually made a profit?"
...Now that she mentioned it... there was a theory that it was next to zero...
"I'm sure there's some boring catch this time too. I'd rather choose not being tired and making nothing over being exhausted and making nothing."
"I... I see... You actually have a point there..."
"Don't say 'you have a point'! Lina-san, surely you're not going to say you're dropping out too!?"
"...Well, uh, you see..."
"You already said you'd take the job, so you can't say 'no' now, can you? If—if you say no, I'll write a book full of nasty things about you and leave it in the Mage Association's archives!"
...Are you a child?
"...Claire-san... Let me ask you something. Is there someone in your family named Meena?"
"I have a cousin by that name... How did you know?"
"...No... It's nothing..."
And so, I found myself sticking my nose into another ridiculous job...

The next day—
Claire-san guided me to an old castle looming in the forest. Ivy crawled over the dingy, darkened stone walls, and the air felt damp and smelled of decay. Some unknown bird flew chirping in the distance, completing the "classic" atmosphere in a way that was actually quite charming.
"Ah, here it is, here it is!" Claire-san said in an incredibly cheerful tone, though I had no idea what she was so happy about. By the way, Naga hadn't shown her face since this morning, let alone come to see us off.

"Alright, let's go, Claire-san. Let's do a quick lap, head back, and write that report."
"Right, let's go, let's go!"
If this were a simple Vampire extermination, I could just dump some oil, set it on fire without a word, and watch it burn while eating lunch. But the purpose this time was strictly to plunder—no, to create a report. Naturally, that meant having to carefully tour every floor of the castle. It was a huge pain, but I suppose it couldn't be helped.
"...But Claire-san, don't you find this scary or creepy?"
At my question, she simply shook her head. "Well, I'm weak against ghost stories and spirits, but as long as the opponent is an Undead with a solid physical form, I'm fine."
I see, that made sense. To be honest, I was the same way. Don't call it irrational. It's just the delicate complexity of a maiden's heart.
"Sure, they're scary as enemies, but that's why I hired you to deal with them. It's a waste to be scared for no reason."
I see, indeed. But this was a relief. At the very least, it seemed she wouldn't be a hindrance.
"Well then, shall we?" With that, I began walking toward the castle.
"Hyoohhhhhhh!!" Claire-san shouted the moment we stepped through the castle gate.
The garden stretched between the gate and the main building. Covering its entire surface were a staggering number of human bones... It was quite a sophisticated attempt at intimidation.
"A-ma-zing! How spectacular! Seeing a sight like this... it's like my soul is being cleansed. It feels like I've come home!" She was making these bizarre statements with metaphorical heart-eyes.
I picked up one of the skulls rolling at my feet—CRACK!—and smashed it against the ground.
"Aaaah! What are you doing!? What a waste!"
I thrust a fragment of the skull I'd just smashed in front of her face.
"...What?"
"Look. The outside is white, but if you look at the broken part, it's dark brown."
"Ah... you're right..."
"It's just a fake."
"Eeeeeeehhhh!?" she shrieked in a ridiculous voice.
"It's pottery or something painted over. ...First of all, think about it logically. If the Vampire here had killed this many people, a subjugation force would definitely have been sent by now, right?"
"Oh. I see... you're right... I got my hopes up for nothing again."
"Anyway, let's keep moving."
The two of us started walking.
Clatter...

"...Huh? Lina-san, did you hear something just now?"
"...Now that you mention it..."
The moment I answered—clatter-clack-clink!
Several of the countless bones scattered around gathered together, and in an instant, a dozen or so Skeleton Warriors assembled!
"I see! So it wasn't just for show after all!"
I began to chant a spell.

Crash...
The last one took the full force of my spell and collapsed onto the floor with a clatter.
The great hall on the first floor. As expected of a Vampire's lair, all the windows were painted over from the inside; not a single ray of light could penetrate. Our only source of light was the 'Lighting' spell I had cast on the ceiling. Our welcome committee had consisted of the Skeleton Warriors in the garden and the Living Mails here. Needless to say, with my skills, we had cut through them quite easily.
"As expected, Lina-san!" Claire-san exclaimed in admiration.
"Hmph. This is a piece of cake for me."
"You really are incredible. I guess the title 'The Natural Enemy of All Living Things' wasn't just for show."
"...Who told you that title...?"
"Me, me! I've also been spreading 'Destroyer of the World' to everyone."
"...Please stop. Especially the spreading part..."
Could it be... that all the infamy I've had until now was actually spread by this person...?
"...W-well, anyway, at this rate, it looks like we'll be able to finish our tour of the castle easier than I thought."
"Will it really go that smoothly?"
A man's voice came from directly above.
"What!?"
A split second before I could look up—Kyugogogogo!
Countless small explosions erupted in front of our eyes! And from within the smoke, a black shadow appeared.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I don't know who you are, but breaking into someone's home without permission is quite bold—Lina!? What are you doing here?"
Yes. As most might have guessed, the one who appeared from the smoke was none other than Naga the Serpent!
"Wha... wha... what do you mean 'what am I doing here'!? Naga! What are you doing here!?"

"...What a total traitor... This is why I can't stand old ladies..." Claire-san muttered behind me.
With a vein throbbing on her forehead, Naga shouted, "Who are you calling an old lady!? I'm just here because he came to my room last night and told me he'd pay me well if I guarded his mansion from intruders!"
As she spoke, she pointed toward the ceiling. There, hanging upside down from a chandelier, was a man. No matter how you looked at him, he was a Vampire.
"Listen, Naga, I don't know how much you got paid, but..."
"Fifty gold coins as a down payment."
"Fif...!?"
I blurted out in shock, then immediately turned toward Claire-san.
"Heh heh heh. You walked right into my trap, Claire-san."
"Don't switch sides all of a sudden!"
...Tch.
I turned back to glare at the man on the ceiling. "How did you know we were coming!?"
The man wore a faint smirk. "Hmph... As long as one has money, there are plenty of humans who will side with us. There simply happened to be one such person at the inn where you were loudly discussing your raid."
I see, a spy. For beings who are mostly defenseless during the day, such collaborators are likely indispensable for survival.
"Even so! Turning against us so suddenly... I'm disappointed in you, Naga! —Is what I'd say while casting Flare Arrow!"
Kyugogogogogo!
"Hmph! Those are my lines! Grey Buster!"
Crack-shiver-shatter!
"I always knew you were a weirdo, but I didn't think you were the type to wag your tail for a Vampire for money! Elmekia Lance!"
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Truly, you and I are fated rivals... A Vampire!?"
At my words, Naga's expression suddenly changed, and she glared at the man hanging from the chandelier.
"Don't tell me—you're a Vampire!?"
...Hey.
"Eh...? Well, yes, obviously..." the man replied, looking bewildered.
"I can't believe this... So you were tricking me!?"
"Tricking you... I had no such intention..."
"Stop with the pathetic excuses! Did you say even once that you were a Vampire!?"
"Whether I said it or not! Normally, if a bat turns into a human right in front of you, you'd realize it's a Vampire!"

"I didn't! I just thought you were a strange person!"
"Don't act so proud of it! Please!"
"No more talk! Hell Blast!"
Zabishii!
And so—the Vampire haunting the old castle met a senseless, absurd end. My self-proclaimed greatest rival for life, Naga the Serpent—she's unreliable as an ally, but there's no opponent more entertaining to have as an enemy.
"...Well, anyway, that takes care of the castle's Vampire."
"Hmph. Exactly as I calculated. Now we can take our time looking around the castle."
'Not so fast...'
'How dare you do that to our kin...'
Suddenly, multiple voices echoed from all around us.
"What!?"
Looking around, I saw a dozen or so figures standing in the shadows of pillars and behind open doors.
"Wait... who are these people!?"
Claire-san replied in a flat tone, "Oh? Did I not mention it? There's more than just one Vampire living here."
"I didn't hear anything about that!!"
The Vampires attacked all at once. Considering their numbers and strength, fighting them head-on here was a disadvantage. I could easily wipe them out with a Dragon Slave or something, but that would leave us buried under the collapsed castle.
"Naga! Claire-san! Retreat outside for now!"
"We won't let you escape!"
A Vampire stood in front of the door, blocking our path! Without a moment's hesitation, he fired countless Flare Arrows at us! Naga instantly cast a wind barrier to guard us. Outside the barrier, the other Vampires began chanting spells in unison.
"Leave it to me!" I said, chanting my own spell.
It was a spell to create a Golem. Since the castle walls were made of stone, I should be able to make one.
"Wait, Lina! What are you going to do with a Golem against these guys!?" Naga shouted while holding the barrier.
True, the opponents could use magic, and in a straight fight, a slow Golem would have little chance of winning. However! I ignored her and continued the chant.
"Vvu Vlaima!"
Gogagege!
The stone walls of the castle burst open, forming several Golems. And—of course—holes were left in the walls, allowing sunlight to stream in!
'Gyaaaaaaaaah!'

Leaving only screams behind, the Vampires crumbled into ash in an instant!
"Let's go!"
With that, I ran out of the castle through one of the holes.
"Incredible, Lina-san!" Claire-san exclaimed.
"Hmph. I'm not like Naga, you know."
"Still, I kind of wished you'd slaughtered them a bit more flashily."
"...Well then, by popular demand! First up, Lina Inverse, Dragon Slave, here I go!"
"Ooh!" Clap-clap-clap-clap.
The atmosphere was basically like a party trick.
"Dragon Slave!"
DOGODOGEEEN!
"Ooooooooooh!?"
"Hmph... and that's that."
"...By the way, Lina-san, now that I think about it, what's going to happen to my report...?"
.....
"Y-you should have said something like that sooner..."
"I was saying it from the very beginning! From the start!"
"Wha...! What!? You're one to talk, Claire-san! You were egging me on the whole time!"
"L-look who's talking! To begin with..."
After that—following an endless discussion, we settled on the idea of just taking out Claire-san's Master to hush everything up. ...Some might say we should have done that from the start, but the process along the way is also important. Probably.

Hiding in the shadows of the plants, I quietly waited for the right moment. This was the house of that Graham person, Claire-san's Master. Inside the closed windows of the terrace, Claire-san should be talking to her right now. The plan was for me to appear upon her signal, list her misdeeds, and thoroughly beat her down. Of course, Naga wanted the role too, but we decided it wasn't a job for a crowd, so I was doing it alone.
I could hear voices arguing inside the house. Eventually—
'How could you!?'
Claire-san's voice rang out especially loud. The signal!
"Dame Wind!"
I cast the spell quietly, and the terrace windows blew open with a loud bang.
"Who's there!?"
While still hidden, I projected my voice. "Forcing an impossible task upon your student, waiting for her to come to you in failure, and then planning to satisfy your

own base desires in exchange for turning a blind eye—you don't even deserve to be called a Master!"
"On what grounds!?"
"Heaven knows, Earth knows, and I know—I know everything! To-yah!"
I made my appearance, throwing in a two-and-a-half mid-air twist for good measure. I landed and pointed sharply toward the window.
"Master Graham! Your scheme is all—wait, what!?"
Beyond my pointing finger... Standing inside the open window... One was, of course, Claire-san. And the other—a woman with silver hair who looked to be in her mid-twenties. I stood there, frozen.
"Who is this child?" she asked Claire-san in a husky voice.
"Um... she's the one who wiped that castle off the map. Her name is Lina-san. Master Graham."
Wait...!?
"Wait! Claire-san! Wasn't Graham... a man!?"
She simply shook her head. "Don't be silly. As you can see, she's a woman. ...She has some slightly unusual tastes, though... Did I not mention it?"
"I didn't hear it! I didn't hear it!"
While I was panicking, Master Graham approached me with an unnecessarily suggestive air.
"I see... I like strong girls... You're a different type than Claire, but you're quite to my... ta-ste."
"ROGEEEEEEEEEEEAAHHH!?"
In that instant—a chill ran down my spine, I let out a scream, and bolted from the place as fast as my legs could carry me.
Naturally—I have no idea what happened to Claire-san after that.
Hands pressed together in prayer.

(Apprentice Days: End)

Naga’s Adventure

Zan!

A narrow path wound through the heart of the forest. Rustling the bushes, three masked men stepped out to block our way.

"……Hmph……"

Lina let out a small, unimpressed snort.

"You don't exactly look like common thugs or mountain bandits…… which means you’re the ones, aren't you? The ones who snatched Mr. Lector."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I don't know who you think you are, but you should have stayed hidden in the shadows. To think you’d crawl out so brazenly before me, Naga the White Serpent! ……Hmph. How foolish……"

The men, however, ignored our words entirely.

"……Withdraw from this matter. Do that, and we’ll act as if none of this ever happened," one of them muttered.

"……Heh…… Did you hear that, Lina? What he just said?" Raising a single eyebrow, Naga turned to talk to her. "It seems these people…… actually intend to threaten us with that."

"—Well, what can you do? This is their job, after all," Lina said with utter nonchalance, brushing back her glossy auburn hair.

"I see…… if that is your answer……"

As he spoke, the man drew a short sword from his back with a sharp *zurali!*

"Then you’ll just have to die."

It all began two days ago.

In a certain tavern in a certain town. A man who looked like a merchant, calling himself Lector, appeared before the two of us while we were engaged in our usual idle chatter.

—If you are truly the real Lina Inverse, and if you possess the strength the rumors say you do, then I want you to lend me your aid—

The man spoke to us. He was being targeted by a strange organization over something that recorded the location of a certain treasure. Therefore, he wanted to request our help with both protection and the recovery of the treasure. For an all-out struggle involving an entire organization to be unfolding——

——*What on earth is it? This treasure?*——

Lina couldn't help but ask, and the man answered, though he hesitated at first.

"The Blast Sword," he said.

It was one of the so-called "Legendary Weapons." While it didn't quite reach the level of the ultimate legends like the Sword of Light or the Gaugutsu Staff, its single strike was said to be capable of toppling even a Deimos Dragon. Naturally, if it truly existed, it would be priceless.

In the end, we decided to take the job, but——

That very night, Lector was kidnapped by someone who raided our inn, leaving behind only a memo that read: *Midas Town, Mount Letol.*

"Elmekia Lance!"

Lina’s spell signaled the start of the battle. However, the masked man evaded it with ease. They weren't just common punks or thugs; the movements of the three were those of professionals.

"Assassins!?"

Giving a small click of her tongue, Lina began chanting her next spell. In that opening, the men closed in on us.

"Gaav Flare!"

A ribbon of flame erupted from Naga’s raised right hand!

"Whoa!"

Crying out softly, the three assassins still managed to dodge Naga’s technique. Then came Lina’s second volley!

"Mega Brand!"

Along with the spell, ripples raced across the earth in a spiral centered on Lina!

Gedogooooooon!

The two of us were caught in the debris blowing up toward the sky. One was an assassin, and the other was——it went without saying——Naga the White Serpent. Two of the assassins had managed to survive the strike by jumping straight up and hanging onto tree branches just moments before.

"……No way…… To think you'd involve your own comrade without a second thought……!?" an assassin said as he landed back on the ground.

"It's Naga, so it's fine. Doesn't matter," Lina declared flatly.

……Of course, even if it had been someone else standing there, she probably would have fired off the spell anyway.

"Anyway, putting that aside……" Lina shot a glance at the assassin who remained on the ground, twitching. "It looks like we can get the details from him…… which means there's no need for me to hold back against you two anymore……"

"Shut your mouth, brat!" one yelled, charging again.

Lina drew the short sword at her waist——and immediately threw it!

"What!?"

At the very moment the man shouted and swatted the flying sword away with his own blade, Lina shouted:

"Bomb Sprit!"

The released orange light sphere instantly swelled and burst right in front of the assassin's eyes!

"——!?——"

There wasn't even time to scream.

Dadogaaaaa!

The assassin was blown away by the direct hit. Compared to a Fireball, which bursts upon impact and scatters high heat, this spell generated no heat at all and had a much lower lethality, but it could be detonated at any position the caster desired. Since it wasn't a very popular spell, one could make it look like a Fireball and detonate it right where the opponent dodged.

——Though it seemed such petty tricks weren't even necessary this time.

"Now then—— that just leaves you."

"──Tch!"

At Lina’s glance, the last assassin turned his back and fled.

"N-fufu-fufu……"

A stifled laugh escaped Lina.

"You didn't think you could point a blade at Lina Inverse and just walk away for free, did you!?"

Pointing her middle finger at him, she suddenly began chanting a spell.

"Ray Wing!"

She cast the high-speed flight spell and chased after the assassin.

"──Wh…… You’ve got to be kidding!?"

The assassin let out a cry of surprise, glancing back as he veered off the path and dashed into the forest.

"Daaaaaaah!"

He sprinted with all his might, on and on! I wonder how long he ran? Suddenly looking back, Lina was nowhere to be seen.

"……*Haa*…… *Whew*…… Somehow…… *Huff*…… I seem to have…… *Phew*…… lost her……"

As he stood there panting, a single black shadow loomed before his eyes. It was, of course, Lina Inverse!

"Hi there."

"Uwaaaaaah!? Wh…… are you some kind of ghost!?"

"How rude. I just tracked you from above."

Indeed──the forest wasn't that dense. While high-speed flight weaving through the trees would be impossible, following someone running below from the sky wasn't all that difficult.

"Now then──"

Just as Lina took a step forward while speaking──

‘Mohyo-hyo-hyo-hyo-hyo!’

A laugh that sounded familiar echoed through the forest.

"Th——this voice!?"

For once, a look of fear crossed Lina's face.

'……As expected, a mere assassin couldn't handle Lina Inverse…… Quite so, quite so…… You've done enough. Get lost already.'

The voice was gradually drawing closer.

"……Tch……!"

Leaving behind one final, reluctant click of his tongue, the assassin ran off. Lina didn't move. No——she *couldn't* move.

"No way…… why!? But how!?"

She showed visible agitation. Before long——

"Mohyo-hyo-hyo. It's been a long time, Lina Inverse."

Yes. The one who appeared before her was Diol, the Chimera Creator Sorcerer, who had once plunged Lina into the depths of terror. And standing behind him were about ten figures in sorcerers' robes, their hoods and cloaks pulled so low that neither their faces nor even their genders could be discerned.

"Wh…… Why are you here!? I thought you'd be behaving yourself in some prison by now!"

"Mohyo-hyo-hyo-hyo! Sorry to disappoint, but with a single word——'It was just a joke'——I was let go for lack of evidence!"

"D——Dammit! I didn't know you could do that!"

"Mohyo-hyo-hyo…… But well, thanks to what you did, I no longer have any reason to hold back."

"……Heh…… You talk big, don't you?" Lina flicked her cloak. "But——even if you use Chimeras, you don't actually think you can do anything to me, do you?"

"True enough——I picked you because you're strong," Diol said, a smug smile still on his face. "For someone like me who only knows spells like Lighting or Recovery, it's out of the question. Even if I used dozens of Chimeras, I likely wouldn't be a match. If I literally chose no means, it might not be impossible to kill you, but capturing you alive would be a tall order. However——"

After a brief pause, he continued.

"With these ones, it’s a different story."

He pointed to the sorcerers waiting behind him. The ten figures remained as they were, looking down deeply, making no move to raise their heads.

"──Heh, you say some interesting things."

Lina somehow recovered from her initial shock and returned a defiant smile.

"I don't know what tricks the ones behind you have, but you think they can do something to me?"

"Hmph──I’ll tell you. You know about Copy Homunculi, don't you?"

"What about them?" Lina answered curtly.

They were artificial humans created through sorcery by mixing various materials like animal bones and magic potions with human blood. The finished product possessed the exact appearance and abilities of the person who provided the blood.

"I’ve been researching a step further into that…… I’ve devised a method to create a Copy Homunculus not necessarily from human blood, but even from a single strand of hair or a piece of a fingernail. And──you visited my laboratory. It wasn't very difficult to find a few strands of hair that happened to fall out."

"……I see……"

──*So you made copies of me based on that, huh……*──

Lina whispered in her heart. Ten of herself with the same abilities──but even so, Lina still felt she had a chance of winning. These Copy Homunculi could indeed be made identical in terms of ability, but it was impossible to copy their memories, experiences, or techniques. While the creator could instill artificial memories, personalities, or skills, those were merely what the creator had set. In other words, even if he made copies of Lina, their appearance and magical capacity might be the same, but they wouldn't be able to use spells at all unless the creator taught them.

"If you think you can defeat the great Lina Inverse with that, then bring it on!"

Lina stood tall and made a grand show of it. Diol broke into a grin.

"……In that case, I’ll do just that…… You lot!"

Buasasa!

At his command, ten cloaks and hoods flew into the air. In that instant—

Pishiii!

Lina froze on the spot, her brain seemingly cracking. Standing there—ten Nagas, their chests thrust out pointlessly, hands on their hips!

"Do it!"

‘Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!’

At the erupting, utterly unrestrained idiotic laughter, birds took flight from the treetops and rabbits bolted in surprise. And then—Lina completely lost consciousness.

"Hah!"

Shakiiiiiin!

With a burst of spirit, Naga suddenly sat up.

"Wha……"

She opened her mouth to complain, only to realize her opponent was gone. All who remained nearby were two spineless assassins still twitching on the ground. For a moment, various thoughts raced through Naga’s head.

1. Lina ran away because she was scared of me yelling at her.
2. Seeing as one assassin is missing, she caught him and is making him treat her to a meal alone.
3. She’s trying to steal a march on me and get the secret treasure for herself.

She chose number three without hesitation. Of course, there was no basis for it. It was what they call "intuition."

"You’re still naive, Lina Inverse!"

Thrusting her chest out pointlessly and placing both hands on her hips, she shouted, "If you thought you could outsmart me, Naga the White Serpent, with something of that level, you were dead wrong! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

At that moment—she surely believed the high-pitched laughter drifting on the wind from somewhere was nothing more than an echo.

"Heh…… heh-heh-heh-heh……"

A man’s laughter echoed in a ruined house where no one should have been living. Low at first, then gradually rising.

"Haaa-ha-ha-ha-ha! I did it! I finally did it! Brilliant! You’ve done well, Lord Diol!"

The man laughing looked to be around thirty. His clothes were like those of an ordinary townsperson, but his eyes betrayed that.

"Mohyo-hyo-hyo-hyo-hyo-hyo!"

Sorcerer Diol let out a boastful laugh. Behind him were the Naga copies, once again draped in cloaks and hoods. And there——on the bed before the two of them, lay Lina Inverse, sleeping peacefully!

"But…… she won't suddenly wake up, will she? This girl."

"No need to worry about that, Lord Vista. I’ve used medicine. She shouldn't wake for a while."

"I see…… so by the time she opens her eyes, she’ll be a Chimera, huh?"

"Exactly."

‘Kuhyo-hyo-hyo-hyo-hyo.’

The laughter of the two harmonized into a discord.

"Now that I have Lina Inverse, my Limera Project is as good as ninety percent complete!"

……It seemed the Super Chimera Project, which previously had no name, had successfully been titled. I don't know if "successfully" is the right word for it, though.

"Heh-heh-heh…… serves you right, Lina Inverse……"

Vista looked down at the soundly sleeping Lina, drowning in a sense of superiority. This man had once been the leader of a certain bandit group, but after his organization was destroyed by Lina and Naga, he himself had been handed over to the officials. In the cell where he was thrown, he met Diol, who was being held temporarily, and heard about the Rimera Project. He was told there was even a secret plan to capture Lina alive.

——*This is it!*——

Without a second thought, he offered his cooperation to Diol. His goal was revenge——and to make a name for himself. Even if Diol was the one executing most of

it, his name would instantly become known in the underworld as the man who finished Lina Inverse. Once that happened, it should be easy to reign again as a bandit chief under that fame.

While his contract with Diol stated he wasn't to kill Lina, or even harm her, the point was that he could get his revenge and socially erase her. He intended to point and laugh at Lina once she was turned into a Chimera with an utterly rotten design. Of course—he hadn't thought about what would happen afterward if he did such a thing. He wasn't without a desire for revenge against Naga too, but compared to his feelings for Lina, it was a very minor thing.

A short while after Diol was released, Vista also managed to escape prison with the help of his former subordinates.

"Now then, Mr. Diol, shall we take her back to the hideout and get started on the Chimera production right away?"

"Wait a moment. There are still a few materials missing."

"Is that so? I don't mind, just tell me anything. I'll have my men gather whatever you need immediately."

"In that case, I'd like to ask, but the missing materials are one Brass Demon, one Fire Dragon, and one Deep Serpent. All alive, of course."

"……Hold on, old man," Vista replied in a displeased voice. "Doesn't that mean you're missing *more* materials than you actually have!?"

"What are you saying!? The magic potions and equipment are already fully prepared!"

"But! With that many materials missing, how is it 'ninety percent complete'!?"

"Then I ask you, young man! Which do you think is harder: capturing a dragon or a demon alive, or capturing Lina Inverse alive?"

Questioned in return, Vista was momentarily at a loss for words.

"……W…… well, certainly, if you think about it by that standard……"

"Isn't that right?"

"……B-but look, does it really have to be something dangerous like a dragon or a demon or a sea serpent?"

As far as Vista was concerned, he just wanted to laugh at Lina being fused into some weird shape. In the first place, live dragons and such weren't things you could find for sale at the local shopping district.

"What are you talking about! What I am creating is not some laboratory animal or a toy made by a novice! It is the strongest Chimera in history! It will even surpass the power of the legendary magical beast Zanaffar, and of course, no human on this earth will be able to stand against it!"

"I──I see……"

At that moment, a bit of greedy ambition sprouted in Vista's head.

──If what this old man says is true and the result is the strongest Chimera, using it to make a big break for myself…… wouldn't be bad at all…… In other words, Lina Inverse, who once ruined me, will now become my right hand……──

"──I get it! Mr. Diol. I'll use whatever connections I have with sorcerers or whatever and make sure to get you that dragon, demon, and sea serpent!"

"You'll do it? I'm grateful. ……To be honest, even though I was released without charge, the Sorcerers' Guild is keeping a sharp eye on me. It's impossible for me to procure those kinds of materials through Guild connections."

"I'll manage that side. ──Anyway……" He shot a glance at the ten Nagas lined up behind Diol. "Those things behind you…… what do you intend to do with them? I'd think you have no use for them anymore for now…… actually, all they can do is give me a headache with that idiotic laughter, yet they eat like pigs and gulp down booze…… the food costs alone are no joke."

"──You say that, but──" Diol said with a serious face. "It was actually quite embarrassing when I ordered ten sets of those outfits at the tailor's."

"……No…… that's not really what I'm talking about……"

"I meant that it would be a waste to just let them go so easily." Diol looked intently at his "works" still wearing their cloaks. "To say they're just Copy Homunculi is one thing, but that chest is particularly magnificent! It would be such a waste to show it to others……"

"Among my men, there was the opinion that we should just sell them off to the red-light district……"

"How could you say such a thing!!"

Seeing Diol's visible anger, Vista hurriedly nodded several times.

"I told them the same thing. ‘No matter how much you try to sell them to a brothel, with this unapproachable atmosphere, they won't get a single customer.’"

"Quite so, quite so." This time, Diol nodded with satisfaction. "This nobility! This elegance! They are not something commoners can just lay a hand on."

"……I don't think it’s that kind of thing……"

"Besides. If Lina’s whereabouts are unknown, Naga──the original of these girls──will most likely come looking. They might be useful for something then."

With that, Diol wore a defiant smile.

"──Hmph. Master, there’s something I’d like to ask."

Stopping her hand as she tilted back her brandy, Naga pulled a scrap of paper out of nowhere.

"Have you seen a girl like this around here recently?" She spread the paper out.

On it was a portrait of Lina Inverse drawn by Naga herself. While it was just a quick charcoal sketch on parchment, it was surprisingly well-done, which only goes to show you never know with people. The tavern owner looked at the drawing for a moment.

"……Well…… can't say I have……" He shook his head.

"……Hmm……" Naga crossed her arms.

It seemed he really didn't know. Two days had passed since she lost sight of Lina. She had been going around asking at every tavern she came across, but she couldn't pick up Lina’s trail. ……Well, it was only natural, really. But of course, Naga didn't understand that.

"Hmph…… trying to deceive my eyes even while avoiding the delicious shops in the area…… you’re being quite elaborate this time, Lina Inverse. HOWEVER! To think you can pull the wool over my eyes, Naga the White Serpent, with just this much──you’re still naive! Lina! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

The mutter she let out gradually rose in tone until, in the end, it turned into an idiotic laugh that echoed throughout the shop.

"……Excuse me, miss, miss, miss……" The shop owner hurriedly stopped her. "I beg you, could you please stop that high-pitched laughter? The other customers are leaving……"

"Hmph…… I understand. Geniuses like me are never understood, no matter the era."

"……No, it’s not about geniuses……"

"——Let’s talk about something else, young lady."

The voice came from the entrance. Turning around, she saw several men who looked like warriors.

"Ho——and? Just what kind of talk are you going to give me?"

"If I said it was about a female sorcerer named Lina——would you come with us?"

"——Hmph. Fine then. I have a bit of food left, though."

Placing a few more silver coins than the bill required on the table, Naga quietly stood up. Watched by the shop owner and the other customers, she left the establishment.

"Follow me."

One of them——likely the leader, a man with his nose and mouth hidden by a muffler——spoke, and they proceeded down the noon-day street in a group. Perhaps sensing the strange atmosphere, pedestrians hurriedly made way.

"——Shall I tell you just what has happened to Lina Inverse now?"

"Hmph! I have a general idea already!"

"She’s with us now."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I knew it! I thought it would be something like that."

The group was gradually heading toward the outskirts of town.

"Oh. So you noticed, after all."

"Hmph. But Lina isn't all that much either——did she think that people like you could defeat me, Naga the White Serpent?"

"……? You seem good at talking big. If you take us lightly, you won't live to see tomorrow’s sunrise. ……Though I have no intention of letting you see it even if you don't take us lightly."

"Hmph. How sad. Even if one can see their own face in a mirror, there is no mirror that reflects one’s true strength…… I see. So you’re just a distraction to buy time. A move Lina would use."

"……? A…… anyway, sorry, but you have to disappear. That's the request from our sponsor."

The men stopped. It was a small wasteland on the outskirts of town. Naturally, there were no other signs of people around. Naga and the men faced each other head-on.

"Hmph. Isn't it about time to stop being so pretentious? If you quietly tell me what you have to say and leave, I'll spare your lives. ……Given it's Lina, she's probably already reached Midas, hasn't she?"

"……? W…… well, certainly, probably around now. ……But you, haven't you felt like our conversation has been subtly off for a while now?"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Do you think you can deceive me with such transparent lines!?"

As she spoke, she flicked her cloak with a *buasasa!*

"I've already seen through the fact that you were hired by Lina to stall me!"

"H-hey!?"

But Naga ignored the man's words and was already beginning the incantation for a spell.

"……Fine! Whatever works! Do it! You lot!"

At his command, the warriors drew their weapons one after another and rushed toward Naga! But──too slow!

"──Hmph!"

A smile appeared on Naga's face, and a chill blew toward the men.

"──What!?"

"Demona Crystal!"

Thick mist suddenly blew up from the ground, enveloping the warriors in an instant and freezing them where they stood.

Gichii!

The sound of creaking ice echoed.

"──Hoh……" Naga whispered in a small voice. "To dodge that just now…… you're quite something, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't go that far……" the man answered in a quiet voice.

It was the leader who had half his face hidden by a muffler. He alone had managed to evade Naga's spell by a hair's breadth.

"My apologies…… It seems we were the ones who were taking you lightly……"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you've finally realized!"

"……However……"

The man drew his sword with his right hand, and at the same time, with an inconspicuous movement, he reached his left hand behind his back and quietly took something out.

"I don't want to lose to someone who wears such strange clothes and does nothing but laugh idioticly…… I'm going to get serious."

"Hoh…… how interesting. Then that 'seriousness' or whatever it is──let me see it!"

Along with her voice, Naga drew a dagger from behind her waist and threw it at the man.

"──Tch!"

Baji!

At the same time as the man's click of his tongue, the dagger Naga threw momentarily scattered blue sparks and rolled powerlessly on the ground with a *katun*.

"──Hmph. I thought so……" Naga said in a calm tone. "Running a Monovolt spell along an extremely thin metal wire and manipulating it like a whip to defeat your opponent──that was a technique of the assassin Boulei, if I recall. ──In that case, are you perhaps a disciple of Boulei?"

"Hoh!"

A look of surprise and admiration appeared in the man's eyes. Indeed, in the man's left hand, a small tube about the size of a pinky finger was grasped. A metal wire extended from it. There was no way an ordinary person could see it, but……

"You seem well-acquainted with the underworld! ……That's right. I'm a former assassin. A face known to those who know. That's why I always have to wear this stifling muffler."

"……In short, a failed assassin, then."

"Say whatever you want. ……But my skill is superior to Boulei's."

As he spoke, the man moved his left hand slightly.

……*hyun!*

The air let out a small scream.

"Ho-hoh. ──Fine. If you're going that far, I'll show you." Naga quietly replied.

"Hoh. What?"

"The same technique that defeated Boulei."

"What!?"

A look of agitation appeared on the man's face.

"Y…… you, just who are you!?"

But by this time, Naga had already entered the incantation of her spell.

"……Blast it! You're bluffing!"

Shouting, the man's left hand drew a small arc. The metal wire, thinner than a needle, cut through the air and closed in on Naga!

"Chaos String!"

As she shouted and thrust out her right hand, the extremely thin electromagnetic whip the man had unleashed was caught with utter ease.

"Wh-!? That's impossible!?"

Of course, she hadn't seen through the movement of the metal wire, nor was she directly grasping it in her hand. She was entangling the wire with the magical power released from her hand and sealing its movement. And then──

"Wha!?"

The man couldn't help but cry out. The metal wire, which should have been perfectly under his control, was running wild in his left hand!

──*This can't be!*──

He desperately moved his left hand, trying to regain control. Perhaps if the man had simply given up and let go of the wire at that moment, the result might have been different. However──

Bushi!

The wire, manipulated by Naga's spell, cut into the man's body and burrowed in!

"──!?──"

Without even making a sound, the man shuddered violently. Just now, the wire had sliced through his heart.

"Boulei was far more skilled than you," Naga declared coldly.

The man collapsed on the spot.

"──I forgot to mention it──but the one who defeated the assassin Boulei was me."

She flicked her cloak with a grand *buasasa!*──

"──Hauu."

Seeing the blood flowing from the man, Naga fainted on the spot.

"……This is why I hate them…… these unrefined techniques……"

It was only a short while later that Naga managed to pick herself up. While trying not to look at the fallen man as much as possible, she whispered:

"……At any rate…… it doesn't seem like I have time to dally."

She looked up at a distant part of the sky.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! If that's how you're going to be, I have a plan too! Lina Inverse! The Blast Sword and all the other treasures will all be mine, Naga the White Serpent's alone!"

She began chanting a spell.

"Ray Wing!"

Koh!

Wrapped in a barrier of wind, Naga soared high into the sky. Setting a straight course for Midas Town──

"D-Lord Diol!"

Vista came rushing in frantically. It was the third day after they captured Lina.

On the slopes of Mount Letol, south of Midas, their hideout was located. It had originally been the hideout of a certain bandit group that had also been destroyed by Lina. Vista had found it through his underworld connections. The largest back room, filled with

various magical experimental equipment, had now been turned into Diol’s workshop. Of course, Lina, who continued to sleep after being injected with nutrients and sedatives once a day, was also here.

"What is it? You’re making a lot of noise. Or have the materials for Limera been gathered?" Diol asked without even stopping his hand, which was writing something on parchment at his desk.

"It’s not that! She’s come! She’s come, I tell you! HER!"

"Her?"

Sorcerer Diol finally stopped his pen.

"That Naga person! I just got a report from my men. She’s already in Midas Town and seems to be sniffing around all over the place!"

"I see…… that means the assassins you hired were no match for her. Mohyo-hyo-hyo-hyo."

"……! This isn't the time for that! Not now!"

"Hmph…… true enough…… Very well! I shall handle it somehow!"

"……Hoh……"

With a defiant smile playing on the corners of her lips, Naga came to a dead stop. On the main street of Midas Town, the wind blew up yellow dust. Standing in her way were an elderly sorcerer and about ten people behind him, their hoods and cloaks pulled low.

"It’s been a long time—though I’ve forgotten your name."

"I am Diol. I’m glad to see you’re doing well too."

The two stared each other down.

"I’m sorry you’ve come all this way, but…… I cannot return Lina Inverse."

"Hmph! It’s no use saying that to try and keep the treasure for yourself!"

"Is that so……? My materials for Limera will be gathered in just a few days! That is when! The strongest Super Chimera in history will be born!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh! No matter what happens, the treasure is all mine!"

Of course, neither of these two was the type to do something as virtuous as listening to the other. Their conversation completely missed each other, and to anyone listening, it was just an endless string of utterly incomprehensible dialogue. The bystanders couldn't take it. Because they tried to imagine the situation from the two's conversation, some even ended up with headaches and slumped over.

The one who grew tired of the talk first——or rather, the one who finished saying all he wanted to say first——was Diol.

"Fine! If you want to take back Lina Inverse that much……"

Of course, Naga hadn't said a single word about that.

"Defeat me! But don't think it will be that easy! ——You lot!"

Babasasa!

At his command, the ten Naga copies threw back their cloaks. The bystanders reflexively recoiled. Among them were those who ran away, children who started crying, and even some who held their heads and began laughing. It seemed that having their brains thoroughly scrambled by the two's conversation, this impact was too much stimulation.

"Do it!"

'Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!'

"——Hmph."

At the loudly echoing ten-part idiotic laugh, Naga didn't flinch at all.

"You're still naive! You ten there!" She pointed sharply at the group. "Your laughter is merely a superficial thing! Do you really think you can conquer the world with such a thing?"

She said something incomprehensible. However——

"——Ku-!?"

It seemed she had struck a sore spot, as Diol showed signs of agitation. Of course, just what was sore and in what way was anyone's guess.

"The ultimate sense of superiority and the conviction of absolute certainty in oneself! That is what makes for true laughter! As long as you don't have that, it's ten years too early for you to be laughing! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

And so, on this day──the strange high-pitched laughter continued to echo through Midas Town.

"Udaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Vista couldn't help but frown. He had seen something he probably thought he'd never see in his life. That is──the figure of Diol running back, shouting with a changed expression.

"What happened? Mr. Diol."

"I-I-I-It's terrible!"

Panting heavily as he rushed into the workshop, he gulped down the water from a pitcher in one go.

"……I can see it's terrible. So? Just what is so terrible? Did you kill that Naga?"

Vista asked a sarcastic question. The Naga copies were not behind Diol. He could pretty much guess the result.

"……That…… that one…… is to be feared……! That Naga person! She might be far more terrifying than even Lina Inverse!"

"Wh…… what!?"

This was a statement that couldn't be ignored. If that was true, Vista's fate was as good as gone.

"What do you mean!? Explain!"

"……The…… the copies I made……! The copies of her own self……! To the original……!"

"Did they lose?" Vista asked, thinking "I knew it."

However──Diol shook his head and uttered an utterly terrifying sentence.

"……They've taken a liking to her!"

Pishi.

Vista reflexively petrified. In his ears──carried on the wind, a distant high-pitched laugh could be heard.

With the ground rumbling and an overwhelming idiotic laugh, the eleven Nagas were sprinting through the mountains. Soon, old ruins came into view. And blocking the way before them were several dozen men dressed as bandits. Naturally, they were waiting under Vista's orders to defeat the Nagas, but……

'Doe-deeeeeeeeee!?'

The moment they saw the group approaching, the bandits couldn't help but let out cries of dismay. They had certainly received orders to crush whoever came here, but they never dreamed the opponent would be a group like this. ……Normally, no one would.

The group of bandits fled without hesitation. They likely judged it wiser not to get involved. Of course, that was the correct answer.

"Hmph! Freeze Arrow!"

Naga released her technique. Over a dozen arrows of cold air rained down on the bandits! There was no deep meaning behind it. It was just a way to liven things up. She hadn't even aimed, but even so, several of them made direct hits on a few unlucky bandits.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! After all, they're just a disorganized rabble! Not much of a challenge! We're charging straight in just like this!"

With that, she stormed into the hideout. Of course, she hadn't given a single thought to ambushes or traps. It was just an all-out charge fueled by momentum. And then──there were no longer any signs of people inside the hideout.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems they were afraid of me, Naga the White Serpent, and ran away with their tails between their legs!"

Actually, that was exactly what happened. While there were slight nuances in the meaning of "afraid," Vista and Diol had both fled, leaving their subordinates to buy time. After running around aimlessly inside the hideout for a while──the group finally reached the deepest part, the workshop.

There she was. Perhaps they didn't have the leeway to take her with them; Lina Inverse was sleeping quietly on the bed.

"Hmph! I finally found you! Lina Inverse!"

Naga pointed at her sharply. Of course, she didn't care at all whether her opponent was sound asleep or not.

"To escape my eyes just to keep the treasure for yourself, and even go so far as to hire strange people to stall me! ……Hmph! But to think that people of that level could do anything to me, Naga the White Serpent──you're still green! Lina! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

After letting out all she wanted to say, she added, "……Wait, you! You're not listening to me, are you!?"

Of course she wasn't. She strode over to the bedside, checked this and that, and then said, "……Hmph. You didn't think I'd give up just because you fell asleep with some sedative, did you!"

She began chanting a spell.

"Dicreary."

The light from Naga's raised palm enveloped Lina's body. It was a purification spell used by priestesses and such. While it couldn't completely neutralize any poison, it was easy enough to neutralize a sedative. After waiting a short while……

"……u……u……nn……"

Lina gave a small stir.

"Hmph. It seems you've come to, Lina."

"……n……ah……?"

At Naga's voice, Lina slowly opened her eyes──and the first thing she saw were eleven Naga faces lined up.

"──Hauu."

Lina fainted again.

"──Wait, Li…… Oh. This is no good. This is. Hmph…… her mental side is surprisingly fragile, isn't it. Can't be helped. ──You lot!" Naga looked back at the ten behind her. "Sorry, but could you hide your faces with your cloaks or something?"

The ten copies nodded in unison and, where on earth had they been keeping them, covered their entire bodies with cloaks and hoods once more.

"Hmph. That should do it…… Lina. Lina, come on!"

"……u……uu……"

Shaken by Naga, Lina opened her eyes again.

"……n……huh……? Oh. Naga."

Shaking her head, she sat up on the bed.

"It's not 'Oh. Naga'! ……Hmph. It seems your head isn't clear yet."

"……n……I was having…… a strange dream……"

Lina froze as she spoke. She had noticed the cloaked figures lined up behind Naga.

"……It wasn't a dream, was it……" she muttered in a despairing tone.

"It seems you've returned to your senses! I already know you outsmarted me to keep the treasure for yourself and even hired people to stall me! Quietly admit your fault and hand the treasure over to me! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"……Listen here! What kind of nonsense are you talking about!? You! ……I was caught by some sorcerer and imprisoned! See! You know him too, don't you!? That old man Diol, the Chimera maniac!"

"Do you think an excuse like that will work!?"

"It's not an excuse, it's the truth! I saw ten of you lined up and reflexively fainted!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! That's nothing but an excuse! Where is there a human who would lose consciousness over something like that!"

……*Normally, I think they would*…… Lina whispered in her heart.

At any rate, this wasn't going anywhere. Thinking for a moment, she tried a different way of persuading her.

"—Those guys are trying to make us fight each other so they can snatch the treasure in the meantime!"

"Hmph! I thought it might be something like that!" Naga turned and pointed toward the exit. "Come on! Let's go! Lina! There's no time to dally!"

Saying only that, she started running. The ten copies followed.

"……Good grief……"

Muttering with a sigh, Lina followed anyway.

"……But, do you know which way old man Diol ran?" Lina asked Naga as they ran toward the exit.

"Hmph! Of course I don't!"

"What are you acting so proud for!?"

Normally, she would have knocked her flat as she spoke, but with ten others around, that was honestly a bit scary.

"……B……by the way…… I feel like I don't really want to hear it…… but those ten, why are they with you? They were supposed to be old man Diol's pawns……"

"It's obvious! This is what you call personal virtue!"

"……H-m-m…… I see."

While they exchanged such dialogue, the group burst out of the hideout. There, unfortunately, was a man whose feet were frozen to the ground by the shot Naga had fired earlier to liven things up.

"Lucky."

Lina snapped her fingers, ran over to the man, grabbed him by the collar, and asked, "Which way did old man Diol run!?"

"……Th-that way!"

Fearing not Lina, but Naga and the ten cloaked figures behind her, the man readily confessed.

"That way! Naga!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

The twelve of them started running together.

"──By the way, Naga, wasn't Mr. Lector at that hideout?" Lina asked as they ran along the mountain path.

"Who? Is that?"

Zagashaaaa!

Lina accidentally plunged into the bushes.

"……YOU! He's our client! For this time! The one who brought the talk about the treasure and got kidnapped!"

"Hmph! Don't make me laugh! Lina Inverse! As if anyone would still remember something like that!"

"What are you acting so proud for!?"

"Anyway, it seems no one was there besides you. Either they were taken with them, or they’ve long since been disposed of."

"……Probably the organization that kidnapped Mr. Lector contacted old man Diol in some way and agreed to cooperate! In that case, where those guys are fleeing is──where the treasure is!"

"I see! If that’s the case, we have to hurry! ──You lot!"

Naga stopped abruptly and said to the ten cloaked figures, "Lina and I will chase them! You wait in Midas Town!"

As soon as Naga finished speaking, the ten copies immediately turned around.

"……The town is…… probably going to panic…… right?"

Watching them leave, Lina couldn't help but mutter.

"It’s fine. They should have developed immunity by now."

Of course, this line was incomprehensible to Lina.

"More importantly, Lina, we’re tracking them from the sky now!"

"Got it!"

The two’s spells harmonized.

"Ray Wing!"

"……J-just how far do you plan to run……!?"

"……I-I don't know! Anyway…… we’re just running!"

To Diol, who asked while gasping for breath, Vista gave an irresponsible answer, also gasping for breath.

"……Hah…… th-this should be far enough…… they shouldn't know where we’ve run to……"

"……Th-that’s true……"

They finally stopped. Their breathing gradually settled.

"……H-h-h…… OH NO!" Diol suddenly shouted, as if he’d remembered something.

"……What is it……?"

"……I was in such a hurry…… I left Lina behind there……"

"……We didn't have the leeway…… to take her with us……"

"True…… she should be asleep for another half day with the medicine, but if those people and a revived Lina join forces, things will get a bit bad."

"They’re already plenty bad."

The voice suddenly came from the side.

‘Wha!’

Vista and Diol reflexively looked back. There, of course, were Lina and Naga! But, the ones who let out cries of surprise were Lina and the other.

‘──Mr. Lector!?’

"……Hmph! I-I-If I’m found out, I’ve got no choice!"

Whether he was being defiant or had given up, Vista drew a long sword from his back and spoke while taking a stance.

"That’s right! My real name is Vista! The former leader of the bandit group you destroyed before, ‘Poison’! ……Though since I had a beard then, you probably wouldn't recognize me!"

"──Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-hoh."

Lina’s face twitched.

"So you called yourself ‘Lector’ and appeared before us, told us a made-up story about being ‘targeted,’ and then disappeared from the inn. To lure us here and crush us on the way, you even went so far as to leave a memo behind."

"H-heh! That’s right! By the way, I met this old man in the cell I was thrown into before! The old man was released, and I escaped!"

Vista reflexively explained. Of course, he wasn't doing it out of kindness. This was an opponent who had utterly defeated him before. If he didn't keep talking, he couldn't help but feel anxious.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh…… Listen! Don't think you’ve cornered me! If I get serious……"

"Dill Brand."

Mobegowaaaa!

Vista and Diol were blown away by Lina’s spell. And so——the battle was over.

"……u……ku…… ow-ow-ow…… damn it……"

Vista slowly picked himself up. And then he realized. The cold stares of Lina and Naga looking down at him, and a shovel lying nearby.

"So you’re awake……" Lina said in a lingering tone.

"……W-what do you think you’re going to do to me!?" His voice naturally rose in pitch out of fear.

"Hmph. It’s obvious, isn't it?" This time, it was Naga. "You’re going to dig up the treasure with that shovel. The Blast Sword, that is."

"……A-are you guys stupid!?" Vista said with a twitching smile. "The treasure was a made-up story……"

"Now listen, Mr. Vista," Lina addressed him with a smiling face.

At that moment, Vista finally realized that neither of their eyes was smiling at all.

"We know that. But, to say ‘just kidding’ after all this, even if the world forgave you, do you think Naga or I would?"

"……I-I don't think you would……" Vista answered with tears in his eyes from terror.

"I’m glad you understand. ——Now."

Lina handed the shovel to Vista and, with a broad smile, said:

"Dig until it comes out."

And so——for the next two days until he collapsed from exhaustion, Vista continued to dig endlessly for a treasure that would never appear, crying all the while.

One incident had ended. Diol had his qualifications completely revoked by the Sorcerers' Guild and was sent straight to prison. It goes without saying that Vista was also thrown into a cell after he finished digging until he collapsed. The remaining problem was——

In a certain tavern in a certain town.

Lina was holding her head before ten Nagas who continued to devour food and drink. She had offered them to the Sorcerers' Guild as experimental Copy Homunculi, but they had been refused without a word.

"……What are we…… going to do with this……?"

To Lina's utterly depressed words, however, Naga said in a cheerful voice:

"Hmph! No need to worry! Besides, it's nice and lively, isn't it?"

"……I'm…… not talking about that kind of thing……"

"In that case, are you worried about the food costs!? Hmph! You're still narrow-minded! Lina Inverse! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

'Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!'

The ten others joined in the laughter. Lina crouched down, holding her head again. And so today, too, the laughter of the Nagas echoed through the tavern from which all the other customers had fled.

(In a sense,) they lived happily ever after.

(Naga's Adventure: End)

Afterword

L: Everyone! Sorry to keep you waiting! We present to you *Slayers Special* Volume 3: *Naga's Adventure*! Today's commentary is brought to you by me, L—the one who secretly swapped out the manuscript in the envelope headed for the editorial department while the author was out. (I've totally embraced it now.) In a rare move for this volume, the newly written story actually serves as the book's title. Speaking of new stories, it seems our author likes to rearrange the series title every time the image of the work shifts. *Special*, *Excellent*, *EX*... It makes me feel an instinctive sense of excitement wondering if he'll eventually run out of series titles. ...But I guess if we have *Special* and *Excellent*, the next ones should be *VSOP* or *Napoleon* [Note: Brandy grades]. If you want my personal request, I'd love for him to use *Slayers Black RX Bio Rider*. ...However, after dropping all those plot hints in the main series, I wonder when on earth Volume 6 is coming out... By the way, the author has a new series coming up after this *Special 3*... Well, it looks like Volume 6 will be coming after *even more* of that. Curse you, Kanzaka! Unforgivable! What happened to my chance to shine!? If it comes to this, even if I have to break into another world...!

S: Ahh! L-sama, please calm down! **L:** Don't you dare barge in here!!

(CRASH!)

L: ...Geez... You can't let your guard down for a second...

Author: ...That's my line...

L: Ha! Author (You)! What are you doing here!?

Author: Even though it's Sunday, the bookstore in front of the station I was planning to stop at was closed... wait, that doesn't matter! Why did you open the envelope and... ...Hey... what happened to the "Afterword"?

L: I'm writing it right now.

Author: Not "I'm writing it right now"! What happened to the one that was inside the envelope!?

L: Oh, a recycling truck passed by just a moment ago.

Author: Youuuuuuu!!

L: Ah, right. I also made sure to delete your afterword that was recorded on the word processor's floppy disk.

Author: ...To go... that far...

L: Well, duh. If I don't do this, I'm never going to get any screen time. How "devoted" of me.

Author: Like hell that's "devoted"!! ...What am I going to do... good grief...

L: At this point, you have no choice but to use this afterword.

Author: It's not "no choice." You... argh! Fine, fine! Even if I refuse here, you'll probably just do something behind my back later anyway!

L: Exactly.

Author: ...Guess we're going with this, then... Anyway, it seems like *Slayers* books are starting to pop up here and there at Comiket lately.

L: Yeah, all sorts of things are coming out. Fan clubs, doujinshi...

Author: *Sniff!* This is what it means to be a truly blessed author! To all the readers, thank you so very much! ...But speaking of doujinshi, I heard something from my editor a little while ago. Apparently, at the Harumi Comiket, there was a *Slayers* 18+ adult book...

L: ...Like an "unthinkable world" featuring Phil-san and Tarimu...

Author: Gyaaaaaaaah! What kind of horrific imagination do you have!? What kind of doujin artist would draw that!?

L: Well, the world is full of eccentric people...

Author: There's a limit! ...I'm saying this just in case, but you there! Just because I wrote this in the afterword, do NOT draw a suspicious scene between Philionel and Tarim and send it to the author! ...Changing the subject! Let's change the subject!

S: Oh, right. We're planning to hold the second *Slayers* popularity poll soon, so...

L: I told you NOT to barge in!!

(SQUISH/CRUNCH)

Author: Ahh! That was heartless and tearless!

L: It's fine because it's "S." (Savage) **Author:** True. (Coldly)

S: *Sob sob*...

Author: Regarding the second popularity poll, I think it will be an event for next year. Detailed application guidelines will be announced in the afterword of *Slayers* Main Series Volume 6. Please make sure not to rush and send in votes early. I'm planning to change the conditions slightly from last time.

L: ...Volume 6 is definitely coming out, right...?

Author: I don't know!

L: Whoa! Have you just given up!? ...Anyway, that's it for this time.

Author: Goodbye, everyone!

(All three in harmony): "Good-byeee!"

(Afterword: End)